

Bent Pine

Central Lakes College

Volume 1 2020



BENT PINE

A Journal of Art and Writing

Central Lakes College

Brainerd, Minnesota

2020

Made possible through a Mini Grant from the Central Lakes College Foundation and through Cultural Arts and Club funding from the CLC Student Life Committee. Also made possible through a generous donation from CLC's Verse Like Water poetry program.

INTRODUCTION and ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Until a few summers ago, I didn't know the Bent Pine had existed. Rummaging the poetry shelf of a local bookstore, I found a copy from 1969. On the tarnished white cover, a single black tree, leaning to the right—bent. On the back, the Brainerd State Junior College (now CLC) logo. Inside, the names of students next to their poems, photos, stories, sculpture, essays, and paintings. The Bent Pine is new and not new. Unknown and known.

New to us but known to the Brainerd State Junior College students who were published in its pages 50 years ago—during the turbulent '60s and transformative '70s:

Frances, Judy, James, Susan, Gene, Kathy, Terry, Janice, Edward, Kay, Thomas, Carol, Steve . . . These students needed Bent Pine then, and we need it now.

We need a place to hold our art. We need a place to document our story.

Five decades later, Bent Pine returns, revived for all of us—students, staff, and faculty.

Many people have made this possible. On behalf of the Bent Pine Journal Club, I extend a big thank-you to each of the following:

The Central Lakes College Foundation, for funding the Bent Pine via a generous Mini Grant. And to **Jana Shogren** and **Amy Matter-Hines** for their guidance and help in this process.

Central Lakes College Student Life Committee, Erich Heppner, Senate President Shayla Makowski-Budrow, and **Student Senate** for supporting the Bent Pine through a Cultural Arts budget allocation and the Bent Pine Journal club funds, and for approving our new club!

Jeff Johnson and the **Verse Like Water poetry program** for offering a timely and substantial donation to cover printing costs.

Leon Dahlvang and the **Graphic Design program**, for working tirelessly and creatively on design and layout and offering the program's talents, students, materials, and printing technology toward making this project successful (and possible), also for printing the journal and helping us to publish electronically.

Mary Sawin, for designing a logo for the Bent Pine and working with us on changes. Also, to Sarah Gorvin for her input on the logo design.

President Hara Charlier for showing interest in and encouraging this project, even giving me a copy of The Howl from her last college as inspiration.

Vice President Joy Bodin and **Liberal Arts Dean Martha Kuehn** for seeing the need for the Bent Pine and helping us to find avenues of support and promotion.

Kenn Dols and **Jessie Perrine** for help in promoting the Bent Pine on the CLC website and via Social Media, and for helping us to get our ducks in a row with the Minnesota State Legal Counsel.

Chris Bremmer for creating the online submission form (a huge help!) and for getting the web page up and running—all quickly and efficiently.

Scott Streed and **Corey Hins** for helping to troubleshoot technology options for the submissions process, and Corey for setting up the Bent Pine email account.

Mark Ambroz, for supporting the Bent Pine with a video story on CLCTV, and to **Kiernan McFadden** for planning and creating the video.

Bruce Fuhrman, for offering and providing a time for re-photographing student work.

Christina Anderson, for answering all of my budget questions promptly and with patience and clarity.

David Bissonette, for archiving old copies of the Bent Pine online, for offering/reserving space for club meetings, and for hanging posters on the Staples campus.

Casey Hochhalter and **Matthew Fort**, for sitting down with me in 2018 to hash out the possibilities—for their enthusiasm and belief in the project. And Casey, for his artist's eye and input on the visual arts aspect of the journal and for offering the CLC gallery as a Bent Pine exhibit venue.

The English Department—Jeff, Leane, Ryan, Kate, Matt, Adam, James, Lori-Beth, and Julie—for being the most top-notch English department and set of colleagues ever and for supporting this project through funding the awards and printing, and for offering input along the way, encouraging your students to publish, and cheering us on.

The Honors Program, Adam Marcotte, and **Kate Porter** for encouraging students to lead. Their involvement was critical in ensuring a student-led club and project.

Faculty Advisors of 2-year college Journals across the United States, for their help during my sabbatical research project of 40+ other journals, including email and phone interviews. Their wisdom and tips were invaluable.

The originators of the Bent Pine, including former advisors Joseph Plut, John Hassler, Evelyn Matthies, Verne Nies, and Rick Hill. Without your original journal, we'd be missing an anchor to the history of this work at our college.

Bent Pine Journal Club—Desirae Rhodes, Olivia Jackson, Caleb Conklin, Miranda Ostlund, Mallory Maine, Kiernan McFadden, Kaleigh McCoy, Tatiana Park, Nicole Host, and other occasional visitors. Your weekly dedication to making the publication happen inspired me and kept me going—you worked hard, and here it is! And to our officers/leaders: Desirae, thank-you for tackling the President role with finesse and focus, Olivia for being the steady and creative Vice President, Caleb for your patience as treasurer, Miranda for your poster design and reliable energetic input as Production Editor, and Mallory for your keen eye and willingness to copyedit. I look forward to working with all of you on the next issue!

And to all the brave, creative students, staff members, and faculty who submitted work to Bent Pine. We didn't anticipate such interest in our first year back, and your many submissions made this process so encouraging and real. **We thank you!**

- Brandy Lindquist, English Instructor and Bent Pine Journal Club Advisor

THE BENT PINE JOURNAL TEAM

President: Desirae Rhodes

Vice President: Olivia Jackson

Production Editor: Miranda Ostlund

Copyeditor: Mallory Maine

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Faculty Graphic Designer/Layout: Leon Dahlvang, Graphic Design

Faculty Exhibit Coordinator: Casey Hochhalter, Art

The Bent Pine Journal Club: Desirae Rhodes, Olivia Jackson, Miranda Ostlund, Mallory Maine, Caleb Conklin, Kiernan McFadden, Kaleigh McCoy, Tatiana Park, and Nicole Host.

“Think left and think right and think low and think high.

Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try”

--Dr. Seuss

Creativity is much more than poems, plays, photographs, and paintings; it is the driving force behind innovation. It allows the human mind to think outside the box. Encouraging such creativity permits society to push forward. As students, we felt the need for a place that granted the CLC community an outlet to express their creative spirit. It is our hope that the reintroduction of the Bent Pine journal will provide that channel. The revival of this journal would have never been made possible without the brilliance and determination of one person, our advisor, Brandy Lindquist. It is through her leadership that the Bent Pine Journal is possible. We want to thank her for allowing us the pleasure of accompanying her on this journey. Additionally, we thank the students, staff, and faculty that submitted their pieces to the Bent Pine. It takes a brave soul to share their artistic prowess with the world.

- Desirae Rhodes,
CLC Honors student and Bent Pine Journal Club President

THE BENT PINE JOURNAL TEAM

Mission Statement:

We are a team of creative students with backgrounds in various mediums of art. Our mission is to shine a spotlight on the artistic spirit of our CLC community. The Bent Pine is an outlet for any shy artist, developing writer, or proud poet. We want to celebrate and publish the imaginative works of students, staff, and faculty to illuminate the Brainerd Lakes Area. Together we hope to create something that encourages self-expression and a shared sense of belonging—through Art.

Printed By: Central Lakes College Graphic Design

Cover Image: The Lion King by Sarah Gorvin, CLC student

Bent Pine Logo: Mary Sawin, CLC student

FACULTY SELECTION AWARDS

Literature:

Noah Mogensen
“Reading by Moonlight”

Taylor Breen
“Drop in the Ocean”

Alyson Eversman
“Farming the Prairie”

Visual Arts:

Olivia Jackson
Hand Study

Alyssa Neistadt
Heron

Sarah Gorvin
Desert Winds

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Drew Anderson	Father John Misty Pastiche	122
	Songs For the Dumped	
	The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds	148-156
Taylor Breen	<i>Drop in the Ocean*</i>	14
Chris Bremmer	Reflection	167
Violet Burr	The Mother of All Collection	68
	The Mother of All Collection 2	166
Joshua Carter	Crow in Flight	54
Caleb Conklin	The Man I am	162
Scott Crosswhite	The Price of a Life	78-79
	A Girl in the Snow	82-83
Becky Davis	The Bottle (Words to the first song I ever wrote)	62
Ryan Deblock	A Brotherly Shape	118-121
Alyson Eversman	<i>Farming the Prairie*</i>	16-21
Sarah Gorvin	<i>The Lion King Tree*</i>	13
	<i>Desert Winds*</i>	24
	Azul	129
	BirdsEye	147
Emma Hardy	How Poetic	30
Casey Hochhalter	Pulse	116
Mikayla Horgan	This is Me	33
Olivia Jackson	<i>Hand Study*</i>	15
	Girlfriend	44
	Dorm	49
	Orange Used to be My Favorite Color	57
	Seaside Abode	67
	Broken Window	84
	Tattoo Triptych	112
	Majesty	117
	When He's Outside	139
	Lavender	158-159

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Kayla Jensen.....	Personal Collection	43
	Personal Collection 2	163
Jeff Johnson.....	Dismas Saw.....	74
Savannah Johnson.....	Victorian	131
Shaylyn Johnson	A Day of Fall	86
	The Mallard	95
	Winter Peace	132
Tracey Kloeckl-Jiménez .	The Tsunami Child.....	37
	The Beginning	38
Robb Kolodziej.....	Looking for Love in the Dark.....	36
	Transparent Shadow	135
Ali Langhorst	Spinning Thoughts	48
Lori-Beth Larsen	Breakfast	111
Amanda Ledford	Closed Doors, Open Windows	34
Alicia Lemond	Soft Decay.....	27
	Intertwined	61
	In the Light	76
Brooke Lochen.....	The Yellow House.....	69
Toni Madges	Neglect	39
	Knowledge	40
	Strength.....	72
	Greed	80
Mallory Maine	Synthesia of Character.....	31
	Honey.....	157
Adam Marcotte	My Old-Man Garage Sale	70
	Bert: A Poem for our Wood Boiler.....	73
Amy Matter-Hines	Feathered Friends Haiku	41
	Seasons	42
Emma Mattison	Circular Lights	28
	Circular Lights 2.....	63

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Crystal McCormick	Where am I, Addiction	45
Kaleigh McCoy	My 9/11 Came Crashing.....	55
	Awaken	56
Kiernan McFadden	Nihilo Caelum	23
	Man Made Waste	25
	I Laugh.....	87-93
Colton Mertes.....	Olive Simulation.....	94
Noah Mogensen.....	<i>Reading by Moonlight*</i>	12
	Signature.....	59
	Winter Note	60
Samantha Mrazek	Ordeal by Cheque	96-110
Alyssa Neistadt	<i>Heron*</i>	22
	2015	77
Liberty Nunn.....	Fingerprints on My Heart.....	136-138
Mia Oaks	Waves.....	64
	The Calm	75
Crystal Olson	Sunset Grouse Among the Apples.....	32
	Cub Over the Dog Salmon River	81
	St. Louis River Footbridge.....	85
Miranda Ostlund.....	Eleven Months	53
	Church and State.....	71
	Norris Dragon.....	161
Jessica Otto	New Orleans	58
Tatiana Park	Minnesota isn't a mistress, she's the committed relationship	26
	You take the time to install an AC unit in my room	29
Tristan Pierce	TJ and the Banshee.....	113-115
Emily Pooler	The Shooting Star Girl	66
Lacey Purcell	The Crying Lady.....	65
Vincent Reed	The Reflection	46-47

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Desirae Rhodes	Birthday Wishes	35
	Exorcising My Worries	123-127
	Perfect Bloom	164
Roseanna Roubinek	Peaceful Dark	144
	Colorful Winter	145
Tanya Ryappy	Youth	128
	What Made Me the Woman I Am	130
	High Falls	140
	Autumn Reflection	160
Mary Sawin	Canadian Adventures	50
Benjiman Schlegel	Log	165
Johnixus Simon	Add to the Chili	133-134
Nick Tabatt	Patience at a Young Age: A Memoir	141-143
Amber Whiting	You Were so Sweet	51
	Van Gogh	52
Jeannie Wynn	Take Me Away to a Simpler Place	146

** Faculty Awarded Pieces*

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

Reading by Moonlight | **NOAH MOGENSEN**

Out from the turning in darkness
without months or days, harvests or seasons
to emerge through ages like a blind eye opened
glaring into the depths of cloudless, blue night
with borrowed light, catching now the ciphered page
cradling meanings lost in a breath.
Black pines sway in the smoke on the horizon.
Few things awake yet
I am here.



FACULTY SELECTION AWARDDrop in the Ocean | **TAYLOR BREEN**

As I stare up at the painted blue hull of the Oceanpearl, sea splash hits my face. The Norwegian sailor, whose name I'll never know, looks at me for a minute. Then he yells, "GOOD?" I nod my head even though I have never felt less good in my life. Riding a pommel horse with a little handle in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico does not instill much confidence in one's wellbeing. He yells to the man on the boat I am to transfer to, "GOOD?" This man's name, I will get to know. His name is Carlos, and he is Venezuelan. The Norwegian looks back at me with a look of "now or never." As the wave subsides and my little transport boat levels out, I jump. Carlos, without hesitation, has me and pulls me up to the deck. One word, three languages, to do the most dangerous part of the job. Good.



FACULTY SELECTION AWARDFarming the Prairie | **ALYSON EVERSMAN**

Black.

It's the scene outside my car window at seven a.m. in mid-October and how I drink my coffee. Outdoor work is impossible without some sort of beacon, or until daylight saving time pushes us back to reality.

The upcoming dawn rises in intervals through layers of clouds. Shades of the darkened deciduous trees guarding the eastern horizon descend, turning muddy gray. A pale halo ascends like the glow of a neighboring city at midnight. A flock of geese fly overhead, using the dark, now navy-blue sky as protection against hunters, though their noisy honks echo throughout the surrounding area. Soon, the bright, yellow ball of gas bursts through the remaining of the midnight hues. The last handful of stars disappear as a rosy haze streaks across the horizon while the sun climbs higher.

The traditional shade of daylight blue filters through next, followed by the speckles of a fiery autumn on the treetops. By the time the sun shines its full self over the tallest oak tree, I have arrived at the work site. Staring eastward again with caffeinated adrenaline, I swear I begin to see the downward curve to the darkened side of the world.

Or maybe I'm still groggy from the forceful awakening by my alarm while the starry night sky still luminesces overhead outside my window.

A ring-necked rooster cackles, echoing like a work bell. Maybe they're the same thing in the prairie.

My eyes fix on the task before me, hand picking native seeds for the local Fish and Wildlife office stationed here in Madison, SD, my job for the next ten days. The plant of the day: Common Milkweed. For botanists: *Asclepias syriaca*. The stout stems shoot about 1.5 meters into the air, producing circular rosy pink blooms annually, which smell as they appear: sweet. Leaves are typically 15-20 centimeters long and excrete a milky latex when broken. Fruits begin as inflated green pods, similar to a soft and furry sweet pepper. They turn brown when the seeds inside mature, then pop open to be dispersed by the wind, where their fluffy "parachute" carries them away to sprout new offspring.

The plants themselves aren't difficult to find, even in endless fields of Indian Grass and Big Bluestem that are slowly being converted to more diverse prairies. I look for the fluff and hope the whole cluster of seeds haven't been stolen by the wind yet. My other option is discovering green pod clusters and hope the moist light brown seeds mature during the drying process.

As I wander and pick, I browse like a Hereford discovering a group of delicious food, eating all of it, then moving on to the next. I almost “moo” as I break off another pod and place it into my bag with the others, the milky substance of the plant dripping to the ground as I move over to the next milkweed.

After a full day of gathering, I’ve collected four garbage bags full of milkweed pods that now must dry before the seed can be replanted on other reconstructed prairies in the future. Their home for the next couple of days is a homemade wooden crate about 10 feet long, four feet wide, and another four feet deep, repurposed from old pallet boards. The large box has vents on the bottom to filter the air proportionally, while smaller crates contain tubes. Attached wheels allow easy moving of these heavy boxes while chicken-wired screens placed across the top prevent the drying seeds from escaping. Mini dryers built into one side of the boxes effectively dry all the seeds inside and prevent any molding. Throughout the ten days of work, the Fish and Wildlife employees expect all four large crates and the additional two small ones to be filled.

The vast croplands and prairie surrounding me remind me of where I grew up—an environment similar to this only located in southern Minnesota, where my father is one of the many farmers growing crops. He too, enjoys gazing aimlessly at the year’s growing crop surrounding patches of trees, signifying someone’s farm. The scene drags on for miles till his eyesight reaches the horizon.

We see similar views but with different points of view.

This time of year, he focuses on the golden-brown leaves of his corn and beans. From the sky, his fields must look like sewn patches on an old pair of jeans. I too, love the view but prefer to focus on the native wildflowers hemming the fields, usually from a mound or hill nearby. The autumn rainbow of purple and white asters mixed with the orangetil-yellows of goldenrod speckled through the browning grasses remind me of lives preparing for a dormant season.

My father gave me the love of the outdoors by always being outside working or farming when I was young. Just the act of being outside encouraged me to do the same, only I was led by imagination rather than a career. And despite our differences in focus, we both express the beauty

Farming the Prairie | **ALYSON EVERSMAN**

of creation in similar ways. When we talk on the phone, we compare sunrises, competing to see who saw the best combination of reds reducing to pinks or recalling the fiery appearance of dark orange along the horizon.

....

Memories.

While picking milkweed seeds the next day with the sun rising in the background, my mind wanders back to the family farm in Fairmont, Minnesota some 240 plus miles away.

My father and I always woke to the early morning darkness; some nights we'd finish the chores and finally enter the house long after the sun had set. The morning routine began with Dad doing hog chores to the sound of the fan drying the current year's crop; the fan echoed throughout the homestead during the whole harvest season. I, on the other hand, fed the cats then snuck back in the house for a few more precious hours of sleep.

I wasn't always a morning person.

As the memory fades, I realize I'm now farming on a different spectrum. Instead of farming machinery, two hands harvest the product, and eventually plant the next generation. And whereas my father has been reduced to two species to focus on, I can pick as many different wildflowers in one day as I desire.

My heart drops as a pheasant hen flushes to flight. Its noisy flapping and scared clucking recede as I walk over to check for a nest, wondering if I'll find any eggs.

Nothing.

I remember riding along in the combine with my dad as he harvested corn. It always amazed me how 10-foot stalks of corn we drove over reduced to the kernels being stored behind us. As the booming rumble of the giant machine worked through the fields, rabbits and pocket gophers hustled from their hiding places. They exhausted themselves running even with the rows as my dad slowed down to give them a chance to escape. I held my breath until the animal eventually broke left or right to safety and away from the green combine. Songbirds perching on stalks or starting their nests within the rows were also flushed and forced to create new homes elsewhere once the machine passed by, collecting corn or beans.

Back on the South Dakota prairie, I've filled another two bags with milkweed.

Time to change species. New England Aster will be my next target. Plant lovers know this plant by its scientific name of *Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*. Single, stout stems of these wildflowers bristle with short hairs. The flowers' branching clusters bloom purple with a golden center. Each flower has a range of 40 to 100 petals and, like milkweed, the fruit of this important late-season pollinator turns brown when it's mature and contains a tuft which allows the seeds flight with the help of the wind.

While picking, I recognize the similarity between harvesting crops and wildflowers: the scale. Are the two paths really that different from each other if we both desire the same thing: saving the world? My father raises the crops that yield food for animals, which in turn, feed millions of people. I on the other hand farm the prairie to increase its size and diversity for various plants and animals. Although these two circular processes possess a common goal, their benefactors are what separate them.

What we need then, is a Venn-diagram.

....

Chills.

It's how my body reacted the next sunny morning to the familiar noise of a large dryer, which I normally heard on the homestead.

Today, I'll be processing seeds rather than collecting them.

Fish and Wildlife employees use four different machines to shift chaff from seed: the fan mill, hammermill, de-bearder, and tumbler. The tumbler is a giant barrel with a screen encircling it, to separate delicate seeds from their encasings. While it's on, the barrel slowly spins like a hamster wheel. Handfuls of plant debris go in one end where screens and brushes lining the top carefully break the seed free from the plant, which drops onto the ground below. Meanwhile, the rest of the chaff circulates through the tumbler 'til it too falls out, on the opposite side onto the ground. My job throughout the process consists of gathering all the fallen seeds using a shovel and scooping them onto an angled conveyor belt where the freshly processed seeds fall into another large crate.

Farming the Prairie | **ALYSON EVERSMAN**

Seeing the process in action reminds me of the bin on the eastern section of my family's homestead back in Fairmont. Riding shotgun in the semi was another way I spent time with my dad during harvest season. We had raw conversations about my future: whether I should be a veterinarian or where I should attend college; the quiet traveling allowing my thoughts and feelings to escape. Other times, I brought a book and both of us rode perfectly content in silent quality time.

The loudness of running machinery from the elevator we arrived at forced us back into reality. Here, truck loads emptied their loads of either corn or beans for drying and storage purposes. Hundreds of bushels dumped into a hole guarded by a grate, like candy falling from a piñata, only times ten. An auger then shuffled the seeds sending them up into a bin to be sold next year.

Sound familiar?

If the amount of crop overflowed the hole, brooms quickly swept the excess back in to get sucked up by the auger's power. The noise is deafening, like being near a big waterfall, and I would have to yell at the top of my lungs to be heard.

Farming crops sustains people. Farming flowers sustains native landscapes. Both sustain life.

Once the corn and beans dry completely and are stored, they will be sold next spring to be used for ethanol and food for both people and animals. After the native seeds dry and are sold, they are replanted for habitat and food for wildlife all over the Midwest. Though the growth speed of native wildflowers is notably slower than modified crops, their ability to sustain many ecosystems throughout Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Iowa should not as they pave the way for future generations of both plants and animals.

....

Yellow.

It's the color of the sun at the beginning of its slow ascent into the sky the morning of my last day in South Dakota; no shades of red or orange, only yellow, though other brightening colors push it up as each minute passes.

For ten days I have awakened at five a.m. to collect and process seeds produced by wildflowers sown by the ever-blowing wind. For over 30 years, my

father has risen to plow, plant, and produce bushel after bushel of corn and soybeans. I harvested by hand; he uses heavy machinery. Both harvests are weather dependent; thus, many fields can be lost due to flooding or heat shrivel. Both require sacrifice for the benefit of millions—plants, animals, and humans all included.

Both are a service to others.

My father can sustain the same number of people and animals each year with successful farming. Collecting enough seeds to restore a native prairie habitat takes years—five at a minimum.

Each is necessary, though a balance is needed. Native ecosystems have been in conflict with agriculture since the 19th century, when the prairie was sacrificed to grow crops. The consequence is the loss of nutritious soil and the contamination of waterways by agricultural runoff. Restoration of prairies will limit these effects. Hence, individuals like me need to restore native prairie and help merge the two conflicting circles into one harmonizing diagram—a future where both fields and prairies are seen as equals.

Three years ago, my father moved toward the overlapping center of the Venn-diagram when he planted a small pollinator plot to replace a strip of cropland near the homestead that flooded every year. Wildflowers such as Hoary Vervain, Showy Goldenrod, and Black-Eyed Susans have already bloomed in the first year with more flowers to sprout as the roots gain strength. Even now, the fibrous roots assist in water filtration and prevent soil erosion. The strip will soon become its own little ecosystem, providing habitat for birds and pheasants. Additionally, the plot's vibrant colors, including shades of blue and purple, will attract and provide food for both insects and butterflies.

Maybe I will go into the farming industry after-all – to collect seeds that'll produce more pollinator plots in the future, where the glistening rays of the rising sun will make them sparkle within the morning dew.

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

ALYSSA NEISTADT

Heron



If the moon wilted away like a rose in December
Would the sky hold its majesty?
Stars in ink, incomplete from what we remember
The sky a forlorn travesty

Children with no moon to dream of going to
Adults with no moon to drink by
Listen for that nightingale we once knew
Hear only the wind's sigh

Alas, Artemis rides again nevermore
The sky grows dim
Like that terror we've known before
It is grim

FACULTY SELECTION AWARD

SARAH GORVIN

Desert Winds



Man Made Waste | **KIERNAN MCFADDEN**

I remember life before the waste—
Ere the error of man killed the land
And Mother Earth's breath came dry
From her breast as the desert's sigh.
That wild dream I sought to understand.

The trees dressed up in fresh garb green
With flowers at their feet like lovers
obscene.
Soon done donning their colored down,
The birds flew among the great wooden
spires
For the few wanderers to stop and admire
As they fill 'til full the tree's leaf laden crown.

The sound of a creek carrying water clear
For beasts to drink from far and near.
To live so lively the forests stood strong;
Millenia passed under their branches
No path safe from leaves in small
avalanches.
Now, the land stands empty in an age gone
wrong.

Death used man in his grand façade.
Claiming the land as a gift from God,
The industrious built industry up to the sky
Eating Mother Earth's bounty in a smile-like
blaze
And belching vile smoke to kill what
remains—

Never hearing through business, the blue
bird's cry.

Then, man's love of Death came out to play
And industry gave itself to man's wicked
way.
Air shaken by airborne bird of steel.
Giving Earth the scars of their war,
Though nothing is what they stand for.
They declare that life cannot be real.

War now over, Mother lays silent
The blood of her children defiant
Staining a world forever defaced
By the will of Death through man
Solemn sky choking our life span
Behold! The man made waste!

Minnesota isn't a mistress,
she's the committed relationship | **TATIANA PARK**

Sunshine soaks my soul in a bleach of peace, joy, and hope. I breathe in the sunlight and feel my pulse quiet within my veins. I relax and smile, fully illuminated with ecstasy provided by our planet's star. I'm not sinking into myself, grasping my extremities together for warmth, looking for an escape into a heated place away from the sting of the air. I feel the openness of the world and all of its possibilities. I can walk for hours with a canteen of fresh water and stop in the shade of a generous tree.

My soul is soaking in the sunshine, it's a nontoxic bleach that eliminates all those winter stains, the ones that left my heart dingy with aches.

I couldn't imagine the end of the cold. Couldn't picture a day lying comfortably in a hammock, hiking in the woods, taking the dogs for a walk. I couldn't wrap my toes around blades of green grass, run my fingers along the cool water in a paddle boat in a lake up North, or press my nose into an intoxicating bushel of lilacs. But most importantly I couldn't see the blue sky painted with pastels, lit up like the heavens, described in holy writings, by The Sun.

I can see clearly now the snow has finally, finally gone.

It's gonna be a bright, bright sunshiny day.



EMMA MATTISON

Circular Lights



You take the time to install an AC unit in my room | **TATIANA PARK**

You take the time to install an AC unit in my room
But would you take the time to adjust the climate of
my internal mental state?
A simple twist of the verbal wrist, a vocal
screwdriver asking me, “are you alright, and have
you eaten today?”

How Poetic | **EMMA HARDY**

Heights!

I have a crippling fear of falling

I have this voice in my head and I swear it's the ground calling:

"Jump , slip, leap"

Now I even fear falling asleep

My fear is at its peak when I use the stairs

Do not judge me, it is one of life's most dangerous affairs

My sweaty palms grip the railing to prevent my early demise

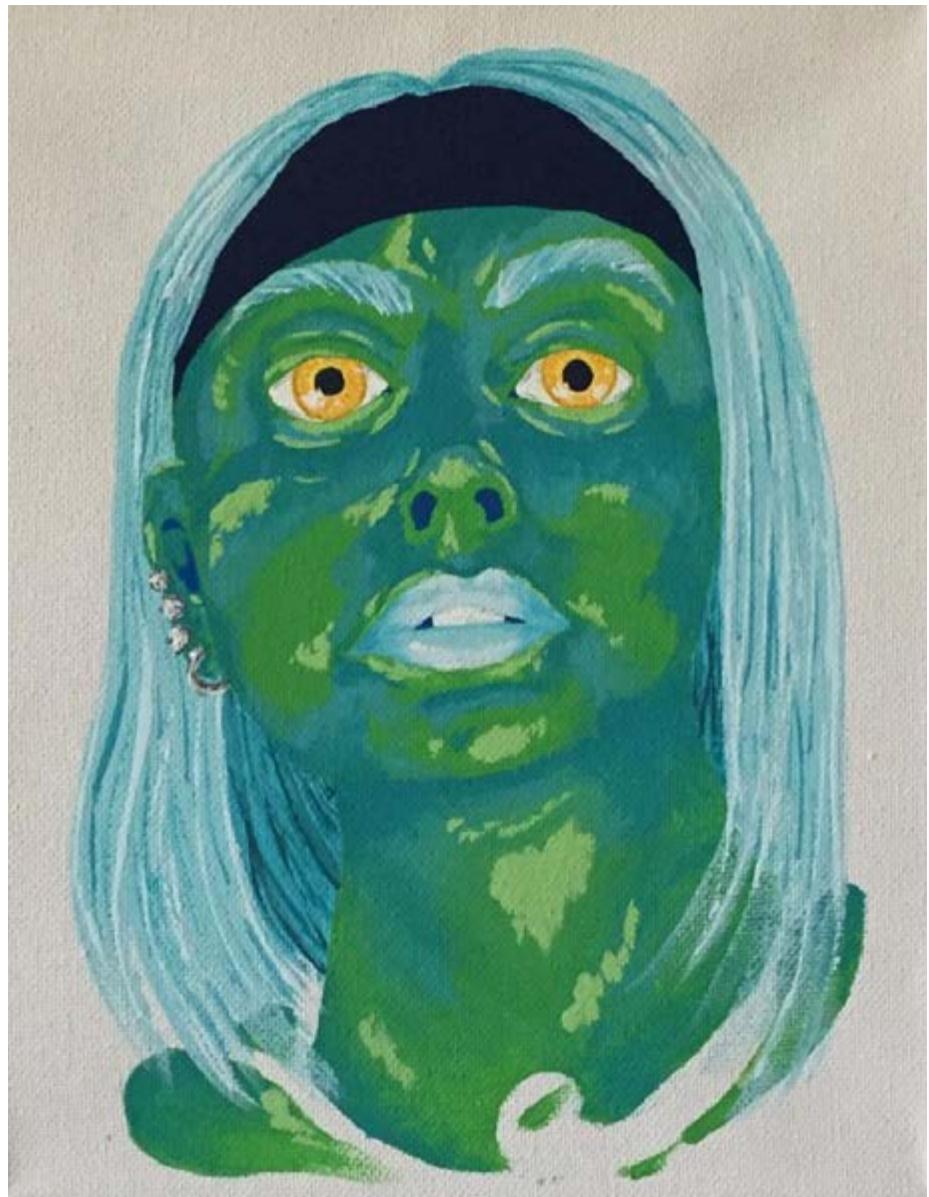
My screaming with every attempt to descend tends to draw some eyes

I even fear just walking because I could easily fall down

Even on a smooth floor with no obstacles around

I cannot take this fear anymore!

So now I lay flat on my stomach and drag myself across the floor



CRYSTAL OLSON

Sunset Grouse Among the Apples



Who helped shape who I am today?

She was a woman of power. Every step so confident that you feared to be in her way. She would look in your direction and you would be sure to look away. Her eyes were a deep brown and they liked to hold you hostage. I hoped she would one day want me. It was almost like her anger at her imperfections pierced my soul. She was truly so unhappy with herself that she had to use every person within reach as a pawn in her game. But the truth was, she doesn't care who you are. Her words were so capable and deafening. When the drunken slurs dripped off her tongue, it seemed to soak and shrivel my being. She was intentional with her manipulating words. She wanted to be sure that you would burn with every word that slithered out of her throat. Her breath like fire against my face.

She will win; and if you fight her, you will lose.

This is her game.

Walking into the restaurant, way in the corner, there was a large canoe shelf. Once my eyes and the canoe met, the world came crashing down. Fear ran through my veins like electricity. I was paralyzed. This canoe wanted to control my life. It wanted me to be weak. It was hiding a secret and would stop at nothing to prevent it from escaping. It was okay with beating a child because it should not be here. It wanted me to remember. It wanted to take my life. In the end, none of this is real.

Walking into the door was this older man. He was tall and had very beautiful white hair. He understood who I was. We locked eyes and we knew everything about one another. He was radiating with positivity. As I breathed it in, I felt sick. His energy was potent, and he had enough to share. He walked up to me and told me he was an elephant. He was drawn to the woman with an elephant tattoo. He told me it was me. I held my breath. I loved this mysterious man. I felt as I always had. He wanted to change my ways and help me. I was beaten. I was bloody. I was broken, and it was obvious. He gave me light when I was in the darkest of shadows. He wanted to heal me.

I am,
Mikayla Horgan

Closed Doors, Open Windows | **AMANDA LEDFORD**

When we're scared and unsure
And we just don't understand
How this works in our plan

Just keep walking
Take one step at a time
Life seems full of guessing
But it's right in God's time

Just keep breathing
Tho you can't see
He's got the answers
Just follow His lead

Walk through the open doors
Through open windows climb
He's got the answers
On the other side

When doors are closed off
If you see no way through
Stand up, keep searching
For every closed door
There is a window open for you

That's what faith is about
Trusting God to work it out



ROBB KOLODZIEJ

Looking for Love in the Dark



The Tsunami Child | **TRACEY KLOECKL-JIMÉNEZ**

She recognized me in my bed
one early morning in May of '05.
I heard the child's voice say "Mommy" with relief after a long journey.
I opened my eyes to see the child, certain it was my son,
But there was nothing.
The son I thought it was ...was still asleep in the other room.
So who was this?
The voice was so clear. I had already exited the world of sleeping and
was awake. Or was I?
Where did the child go? Where did she come from?
Was it one of the many souls of children lost at sea months earlier?
I had often prayed for those children swallowed up by the Tsunami.
Had one traveled all the way across the world to find a new life?
She had decided. A short time later, she became ours.

The Beginning | **TRACEY KLOECKL-JIMÉNEZ**

Monday, May 1 5:54
Pen to paper, fingers to keyboard
It's time to write
The beginning, so much to say
Turn on the light, shake the mouse awake, sit
Make the coffee, sit
Pet the dog, sit
Time, time to start



TONI MADGES

Knowledge



White-breasted nuthatch
Ruby-throated hummingbird
Indigo bunting

Black-capped chickadee
Yellow-bellied sapsucker
Northern cardinal

Rose-breasted grosbeak
Pileated woodpecker
Scarlet tanager

Seasons | **AMY MATTER-HINES**

Swamp marigolds bloom
Eastern bluebirds building nests
Awaken to spring

Spiderwort swaying
Painted turtles sunbathing
Enjoy summertime

Golden rods flourish
Squirrels gathering acorns
Autumn approaches

Snow covered branches
Black bear in hibernation
Embrace the winter



OLIVIA JACKSON

Girlfriend



Is this hell?
The smell of shame,
guilt holding me down,
it's in my veins, coursing.
I drift away, like a sailboat with
no anchor. This drug is like,
the angry sea.
Tossing me back and forth,
side to side.
I have no control.
I close my eyes, and
I see the faces of my children,
wondering...
where am I?

The Reflection | **VINCENT REED**

There is no greater time to reflect on life, than when on the vast, beautiful Alaskan sea. On the past, the present, and the ambitions of a future full of joy.

The morning sunrise with its ember flares, taking you down the road of the past. A road you set ablaze, leaving nothing but embers in your wake.

Now nothing but reflections of better days, days of laughter, of joy, of friendships long since lost. A reflection, I suppose, of all the misdeeds you are guilty of, with all their carnal desires.

Lies you've told yourself, told to hide your pain, your shame, your regrets. Memories flash before your eyes, just like those meteors, streaking across that warm Alaskan sky.

You hold it all in, holding your past dear, like a mother holding a newborn to her bosom. You believe you're strong, you believe it's for the best, never wanting to face the truth.

A truth you must now reflect upon, the truth of who you are, to settle what really burns inside. Its time now, it's time to go back in, back into that ship.

Time has flown by now, you have settled into your surroundings, surroundings that are not ideal. You have time to think, where you are, at this moment, this moment in time, in your life.

The sea has turned sour, winds are picking up now, it feels like a storm is brewing overhead. The fury of the storm intensifies, engulfs you, non-relenting with its gale force winds.

You know now, this is not where you want to be, at this moment in time, a moment in time that stands still. Allowing you to stand out there, in the rain, collecting your thoughts, your ideas, planning your great escape.

You glimpse a little ray of sunlight, shining through that massive storm, that for years you have endured. Life now has a meaning, a hint of what is destined, a spark that will ignite a fire.

The storm has now passed, the seas are calm, the birds are circling overhead again. You go back in after the storm, back below deck, to reflect on what's to come.

The sun is shining bright now, you're headed into port, headed for your future, never looking back now. You know where you are headed, know your destiny, know how many you will help.

The time has come now, to face your demons, an innocence lost so long ago, a childhood that never was. The flames have been extinguished now, you know what must be done, it's time to let go, to forgive.

You step forward in life now, knowing time won't heal all your wounds, it only heals those you allow it too. What should have been, can now be, your destiny clear, nothing in your way now, only you.

The future is bright now, with your past behind you, the only thing left now, is to reach out, reach out to the others. The others that were left behind, who haven't come out of the storm yet.

You're older now, you know so much more, knowledge of several lifetimes, and the heartache, to go along with those lives. So many lives lived, lives touched, hearts broken, memories of the years of hardships.

It's time now, time to put that arm out, extend that hand, touch those hearts, heal those minds. You know you have it in you, like no other does, you have that spirit, that drive, that just wants to heal others.

Reflect on what has been, can be, and will be. Mend those you can, with a story so unique, as your life!

Spinning Thoughts | **ALI LANGHORST**

Today my head's filled like a crowded room,
Thoughts move around like a Ferris wheel spins,
Stopping often just to be resumed,
Sometimes moving so fast it's hard to grin,
I'm standing still against the moving souls,
Thinking about a thousand things at once,
Never feel big enough to be in control,
Some days my mind telling me I'm a dunce,
I find myself longing for tomorrow,
Every day I find a reason to smile,
Knowing I don't need to live with sorrow,
I'm praying to have more life for a while,
Life is too short to be under the rain,
Live each day ready to forgive the pain.



MARY SAWIN

Canadian Adventures



Every time I taste peaches,
I taste you
Your soft lips,
And candy-coated tongue
I taste summer,
And love
Scorching sun,
And butterfly kisses
Every time I taste peaches,
I think of you
Your caramel skin
Burnt honey eyes,
And silk-stained voice
Every time I taste peaches
I feel you, in every way

Van Gogh | **AMBER WHITING**

I saw you months after your burial
Of course, it was only fictional, your death
But perhaps it was simply metaphorical
Because you re-birthed as a snake
The sight made my stomach turn
Your face just as I remembered, but something inside you had
changed
Painted on a canvas as innocent as a victim
Hide behind your art
And everyone will tear that canvas apart
Only to see your soul covered in lead paint
Poisonous
Don't be fooled, there comes a time when your fictional death
becomes your real one
And you're all alone
Because no one likes the taste of lead paint



JOSHUA CARTER

Crow in Flight



My 9/11 Came Crashing | **KALEIGH MCCOY**

September 11th, 2019,
Driving home from a 12-hour shift.
Open the front door,
Wash the day away.
An oral dose of morphine due,
An attempt to impersonate the person she was 2 months ago.
Drained of energy; robbed of her twinkling light.
"Grandma, I love you."
A kiss on the forehead,
Under the covers,
I shield myself from this reality.
Exhausted from the nights before,
I'm up day and night; a college degree sounds nearly impossible.
16-hour shifts to keep me out of debt and pay the bills.

Knock on my door,
Devastation hit my heart like a winter cold breeze.
Now the time has come; a bomb was set off,
Striking true sense of fear through my veins.
On 9-11 my tower came crashing,
You were my muse igniting every fuse,
My loving teacher:
tie my shoes,
become a woman,
Sudoku of all things.

A rush of memories fly in,
Hijacked by her embracing warmth.
Cancer struck her and before I knew it my tower had collapsed,
"What am I to do in this lonely world?"
My cat purrs in an attempt to recover me from the rubble.
January 3rd, 2020,
3 months and 8 days after her death.
My cat's last breath is confiscated from her lungs,
Cancer strikes again and my second tower comes crashing.
I can't take much more; rebuild my towers.
I seek supplies; structures such as these are one in a million.

Awaken | **KALEIGH MCCOY**

Spring renews winter's cold heart,
Awakening a blissful warmth,
Refreshing the picture perfect sun-kissed earth.
The breeze blowing a fresh fragrance of the blossoms that blossom,
Running barefoot through the open meadows,
Leaves my bright smile gleaming.
Birds flourishing as they sing peacefully in the distance,
Earth prospering with its natural beauty,
While mother nature thrives ever so remarkably.

OLIVIA JACKSON

Orange Used to be My Favorite Color



JESSICA OTTO

New Orleans



A river carves its name into the rock.
In time roots cage its side like ribs,
the changing body bearing sunlight
moonlight at its back,
guiding the blind microphyte
through its unfelt distances.
When eyes catch the light that current holds
it comes to its endless meanings,
it comes to itself and time
and when the eyes have gone
it will continue mute
into the boundless moment
drawn by its own course
lost like the eddies coiling, uncoiling.

Wind drift over the sunlit melting snow
blasting swirls of crystals upward
in woods seemingly empty except for this sparrow, watching.

Distant voices carried on the wind,
shrieks and laughter
die away,
and every blind moment drawn from the last,
from out the thin air before it like a magic trick
culminating in this frozen silence

these bare trees creaking
in pale winter sleep and this sparrow,
its eyes coming to the world,
finding in it strange form in forms
among which is a man,
jotting down words for the sparrow he sees.



The Bottle (Words to the first song I ever wrote)

| **BECKY DAVIS**

He doesn't even startle
When the bottle crashes to the floor
A scene all too familiar
Yet she cries again once more

His weapon of choice is alcohol
For the demons that he fights
It's a battle she knows he'll never win
For the bottle has the might

She can't make any sense of it
She'll never understand
How could it ever be
That the alcohol consumes the man

She longs for his affection
Aware she'll always lose
She resents her competition
A bottle full of booze

The nights go by without a change
It's always the same routine
An empty bottle and he's passed out
Always the same old scene

She can't make any sense of it
She'll never understand
How could it ever be
That the alcohol consumes the man

There's still love there, but it's not the same
Her heart she won't deceive
Yet the very same thing that drives her away
Is the reason she won't leave

For she cannot bear the burden
Of what might happen when she's gone
So for now her dreams remain on hold
And the cycle goes on and on

She can't make any sense of it
She'll never understand
How could it ever be
That the alcohol consumes the man



MIA OAKS

Waves



LACEY PURCELL

The Crying Lady



The Shooting Star Girl | **EMILY POOLER**

Her hands are adorned with acrylic paint,
Though diamonds, she has scorned.
When she feels
A little faint,
She stumbles into storms.
She twirls with rain,
Makes magic from pain;
Wounds won't keep her on the ground,
Though she may sleep before she flies,
She's ever adventure-bound.

If she wants to be sought,
If she wants to be found,
The seeker she calls must forget their eyes.
Traditional thoughts,
They must forgo;
Then there's one more rule to know.
If the lady is found,
There's no way around:
One day, they must let her go.
From there, it's best to follow the sound

Of a singing swallow away from its nest,
Or the scent of a restless, untamed sea;
The longing deep within one's chest,
Or a wind-led chorus through the trees.

If she wants to be found,
She may come around
And tell her wildest tales.

If you ask in earnest, she may astound
And take you on uncharted trails.

When we were dancing,
She was entrancing,
Daisies entwined in her hair.
Ever stunning but forever running
Away from all her cares.
Is she free, or is she scared?
It's not for me to say.

It feels unfair she's now away,
That I could not see her longer.
But still, our stories combined for days,
And that's my greatest honor.
It may hurt that she's far,
But I won't obsess,
Nor value her any less.

For a shooting star
Is meant for love
And not to be possessed.



VIOLET BURR

The Mother of All Collection



Often our words are our descriptors; our paintbrushes for life's canvas. But what happens when the words cannot exemplify how the heart feels? The moment is at a standstill and your mind cannot fathom what your body senses.

That is the yellow house.

The childhood farm that raised me – the one that changed me. The smell of warm apple pie that hit grandpa's nose as he walked through the white screen door after a hard day's work. The smile that filled his matured, bronzed face.

Running to his arms for a bear squeeze, grabbing two plates and a much-too-large scoop of ice cream as grandma shakes her head.

It is the place that taught me what love feels like; what home feels like.

The carelessness for life and the ease of the day. Soaring through the fresh air in the tire swing on top of the hill with the birds. Feeling as though you share their wings.

The innocence of a child's heart.

I find that house in a nice book. I find it on a sunny day. I find it in a newborn baby.

The warmth of my soul as I experience life's moments in a way I once did, so pure.

When I can't quite find the words to describe the bliss my soul is full of, I find the yellow house.

And I am home.

My Old-Man Garage Sale | **ADAM MARCOTTE**

I know what my stuff will look like
When I'm dead and someone—maybe you—
Must do something with the tools:
The hammer my grandfather gave me
The perfectly weighted putty knife
The only screwdriver I always use to open paint cans.

Among the relics will also be the treasures of other dead men:
A Victorian spyglass, a forged compass, a machinist's square,
Long iron bolts rescued from a cherry, snowshoe lathe—
A gallery of private hand-work and silent comradery,
Walter, Francis, John, Tom, Mateo, and me,
Family, friends, and a few strangers, for \$10 a crate.



TONI MADGES

Strength



Bert: A Poem for our Wood Boiler | **ADAM MARCOTTE**

“He” is cold, silent...yet still a giant,
Rusting in the driveway.
The new Carrier modulator in the basement
Waits to be fed fermented dinosaurs.

If we can forge relationships with things
I have loved—and now lost—dear Bert,
Ten years of struggle...and scholarship,
19,000 cubic feet of cut, stacked, and burned wood.

To the demolition crew, he’s prehistoric,
Easily dispatched with an iPad invoice,
Replaced with heuristics that hide in pretty boxes
And swallow network packets from satellites.

Dismas Saw | **JEFF JOHNSON**

In one version of the story,
The Apostles, except for John,
all ran—I was going to say *like hell*—
when the hammering began, and they could smell the blood
beneath the darkening, churning clouds.

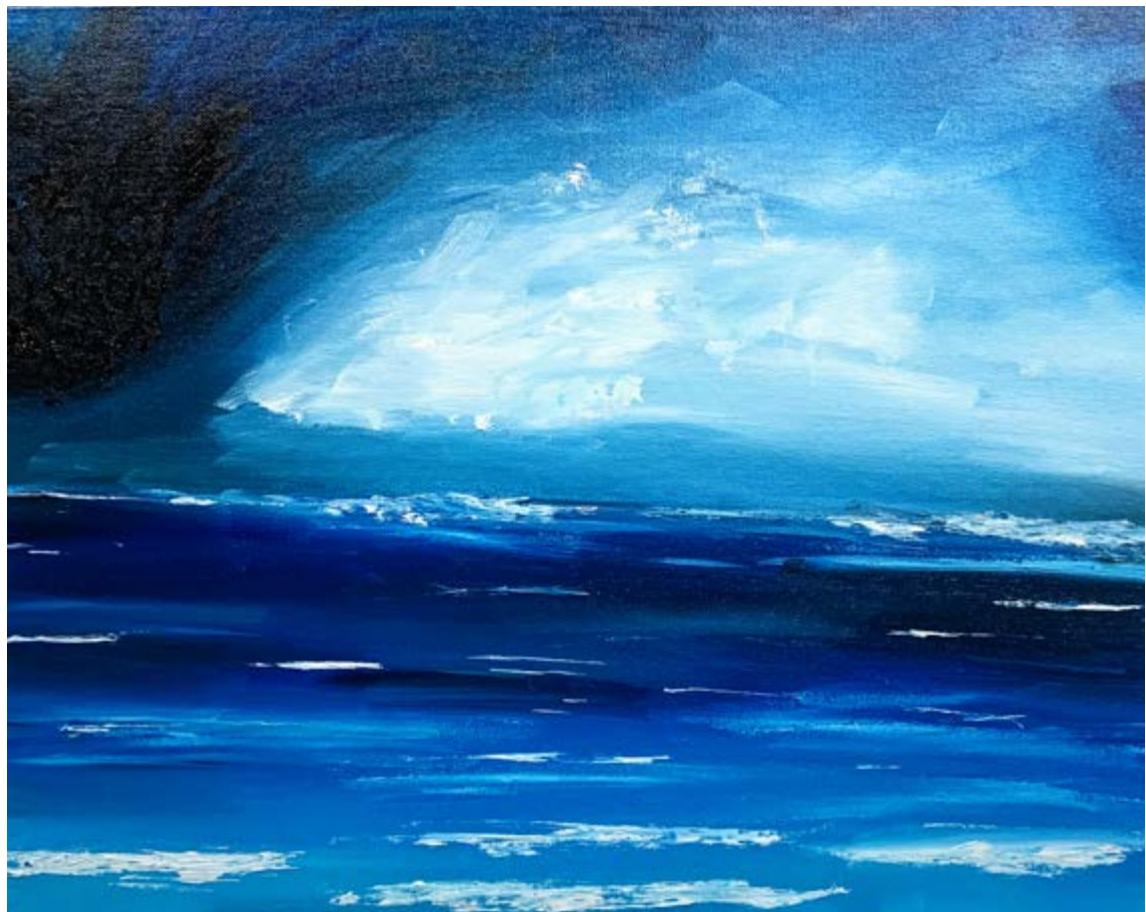
In a book I've lost, I once read another version
in which Dismas, while hearing the sounds
of Gestas the impenitent, screaming,
and Jesus just trying to catch his breath,
saw them running *toward* something,
running bravely to the points of intersection
their Teacher had already illuminated for them.

Dismas watched Saul watching Stephen
who testified before the Sanhedrin.
He saw the first flung stone that nudged him to sleep
under a sky that was blue, without clouds.

Dismas saw the world turned upside down,
As Peter did, crucified, feet pointed
Towards Heaven, while the pouring rain
Soaked his beard.

He saw the head of Paul, saw in the dust of Calvary,
The club for Jude, the knife for Thomas,
And saw the wind blowing on the
Footprints of Bartholomew in Armenia.

As the earthquake began, the Good Thief
Dismas, running nowhere with his broken legs,
Saw before he closed his eyes, an opportunity reserved
Only for him. For everyone else in the story, He was
Teacher, Rabbi, Master, but for
Dismas, the end of all desires was to breathe *Yeshua*.
And he did, again, and then again.



ALICIA LEMOND

In the Light



Her light was struggling to shine through the bottle of alcohol she held so close to her heart... Everyone saw a diluted version of the beautiful soul she had hidden away in the body of a misfit teen following stereotype.

Isn't it ironic? Society tells you that becoming a rebellious teen is wrong but makes you believe it's the path you have no choice but to follow.

She got caught in the shuffle and wandered into the wrong crowd, where she lost herself.

Or rather she was oppressed—the person she used to be didn't fit what she was supposed to be.

She didn't exactly change... her heart never lost its fire... But she drowned herself in an effort to extinguish the flames and disguise the fact that she was different in order to fit in.

He saw she was losing the battle against herself without even knowing what she was fighting for and pulled her out of the brown liquid that was slowly replacing the air in her lungs.

He saw her in the dead of night, when the poison had lost its sting and the bottle was broken at her bare feet, and he saw something she had forgotten about. Sparkles reappeared in her brown eyes and she began to shine again. He saw color return to her dark cheeks. He saw her in her sober, raw glory and told her she was beautiful. The world around her seemed less menacing as it grew smaller and smaller until it contained only him.

His hand holding hers was the only thing keeping her from falling back into the darkness, and slowly she began to trust in the world that had betrayed her once before.

Then he let go.

The Price of a Life | **SCOTT CROSSWHITE**

In the end, what is a life worth? Is it worth ideals, morals, friendships perhaps? Or maybe a life is simply worth only another life. An idea only measurable by itself.

Its own striking magnitude builds up within everyone. A life's worth is a life... An idea so unremarkably true, so significant that it should never be overlooked. Of course... it still is, as those that dress in black cross the line and never look back.

A soldier taking a deep breath before pulling the trigger for the very first time. A knight waging war with bronze, iron and steel simply because he is told to. A brother striking another with a stone, who instead of regretting, fears for his life.

These things are all easy to accomplish without thinking.

If you don't think about what you're doing, then you can't feel bad about it.

If you don't feel bad about what you're doing, you can't regret it.

And if you can't regret what you've done, it's easy to live with yourself.

Some die, and some kill, the holiest of texts don't condemn killing, only murder. But what is murder if not the act of killing one without regret?

Words are tricky here, and can be used trickily, the grey area people wish didn't exist.

The area in which people misinterpret, misunderstand, and plainly disregard words.

While others use the words falsely to lead others astray, the false use of words is but a lie.

Phrases are used, "You're not living, you're just staying alive." I heard once, but what is living?

If you take a population of people and mark them as simply "Just staying alive." Have they died?

At first no, but you have claimed they are not living. If one does not live then they are dead.

If one is already dead then how is it wrong to kill them, you have said those poor souls are not living.

And thus condoned the end of their existence, now how can you discipline those that take their lives.

The grey is full of even more bitterness and hate than Black, here anger stirs within the fragmented soul.

Black takes all and swallows it whole, even the soul, everything is taken and turned darker and darker.

Grey leaves room for tears, sadness, morning, and eternal depravity, slowly nudging you towards black.

But white is pure, it is in the white that we still sin, we still weep and regret, but we move on.

The white is simple, it is pure, and it is a paragon, a utopia. But what is the word utopia.

An imagined place, a perfect place that everyone wishes for but still varies despite this.

The white may be imagined and it may not be, but everywhere you look, imagined or real.

The best people in this world strive to be in the white, whether they make it is up to only them.

But the white remains white, unchanging in its profundity and in it uttermost beauty.

A man dies, the killer regrets sending him to hell, but has still saved his daughter's life.

And so the price of one life is paid with another while someone else loses a relative.

The man that took another's life is overcome with sadness, he now questions why only some die.

He mourns and prays for the man he has slain, but the world's course is still forever altered by his action.

TONI MADGES

Greed



CRYSTAL OLSON

Cub Over the Dog Salmon River



A Girl in the Snow | **SCOTT CROSSWHITE**

A girl, standing in the snow, she is alone now, so very alone that she feels a pain deep inside.

She will never be truly alone, at least, that's what she tells herself as a pain bellows within her.

A longing, a cry for help echoing within herself trying to get out, a shout only heard by the selfish world.

Which now, spinning eternally, somehow doesn't dizzy itself, and ever turning continues to move forward.

Sometimes she escapes the world, if only for a brief moment. But she is inevitably yanked back on course

Forced to move in perpetual tandem, always looking for a way out, wondering if there even is such a thing.

For the world is a selfish thing, and never stopping for anyone, continues to move forward.

Aching, longing, tears of regret, of remorse, hauntings of the past lying within arm's reach.

The world stays ahead of the past with its spin, but the past is always trying to catch up.

The moment she stops to think the past catches her, and the moment it does, she breaks...

The girl stands by herself, on a great hilltop, a cliffside, a plateau, a dangerous ledge with a steep fall.

Below her is a forest of ever growing trees, the trees are tall, the tallest, they are stoic but frightening.

On the other side of the forest is the sea, from here she can see it, the gentle waves turned ravenous.

A storm is coming, and for once, the trees are not frightening but sheltering as they block the waves.

She doesn't want to worry her brother, but this place calls her, as if rooting her to the ground.

She can't bear to leave, but staying hurts even more, she feels a breeze, cold air scrapes across her face.

The air bites at her knees cutting the flesh, she falls on the wounds no longer able to stand,

Kneeling in the snow, she finally realizes, perhaps for the first time, the finality of it all.

The girl who is now too weak to stand, kneels in the snow, all alone, with a great rock in front of her.

A boulder acting as a single stone on a sparkling white hill, a rock not big in size but still very large.

A metaphor and a hurdle, a final resting place, this stone was a grave, or, at least, it

represented one.

Her parents, now resting in the sky looked down upon her, there were no bodies, so they slept above.

As her parents rested in the sky that opposed the earth, it seemed as if they left nothing behind.

It was as if they were never even here at all, gone without a trace with no one left to care.

This cold hardening fact brought despair and longing to the girl's very existence.

With clipped wings and a broken heart she fell deeper into the chasm of despair.

If she just hit the ground it would end. One step off the ledge, and it would all end.

A growling in the distance, a low hungry growl, quiet, subtle, but evermore ominous, The wolves jump at her, she fights them off, and the adrenaline, makes her feel even more numb.

She falls to the snow, lying on the ground seeing red as she realizes her sudden love for the cold.

The icy feeling growing within her, finally cooling the fire in her chest that was eating her alive.

She tells herself, "Maybe if I can feel the cold, if I can feel pain, Then maybe I'm not dead yet."

With that final thought came the darkness, she who could no longer see or move, felt joy.

The cold turned to warmth as she lost her own thoughts and now tired, exhausted from the fight.

Worn from the emotions and the crying, now suddenly felt warmth, a soft glow in the darkness.

A girl, lying on a bed, not alone, but with a brother and her friend, her guardian angel.

Blood ran thick where she fell, but now, she lies next to her praetorian, her reason to live.

She remembers the cold, she's thankful for being able to feel it, to feel something, anything.

But now, the girl is thankful to her brother, even more than to the cold, she smiles with tears.

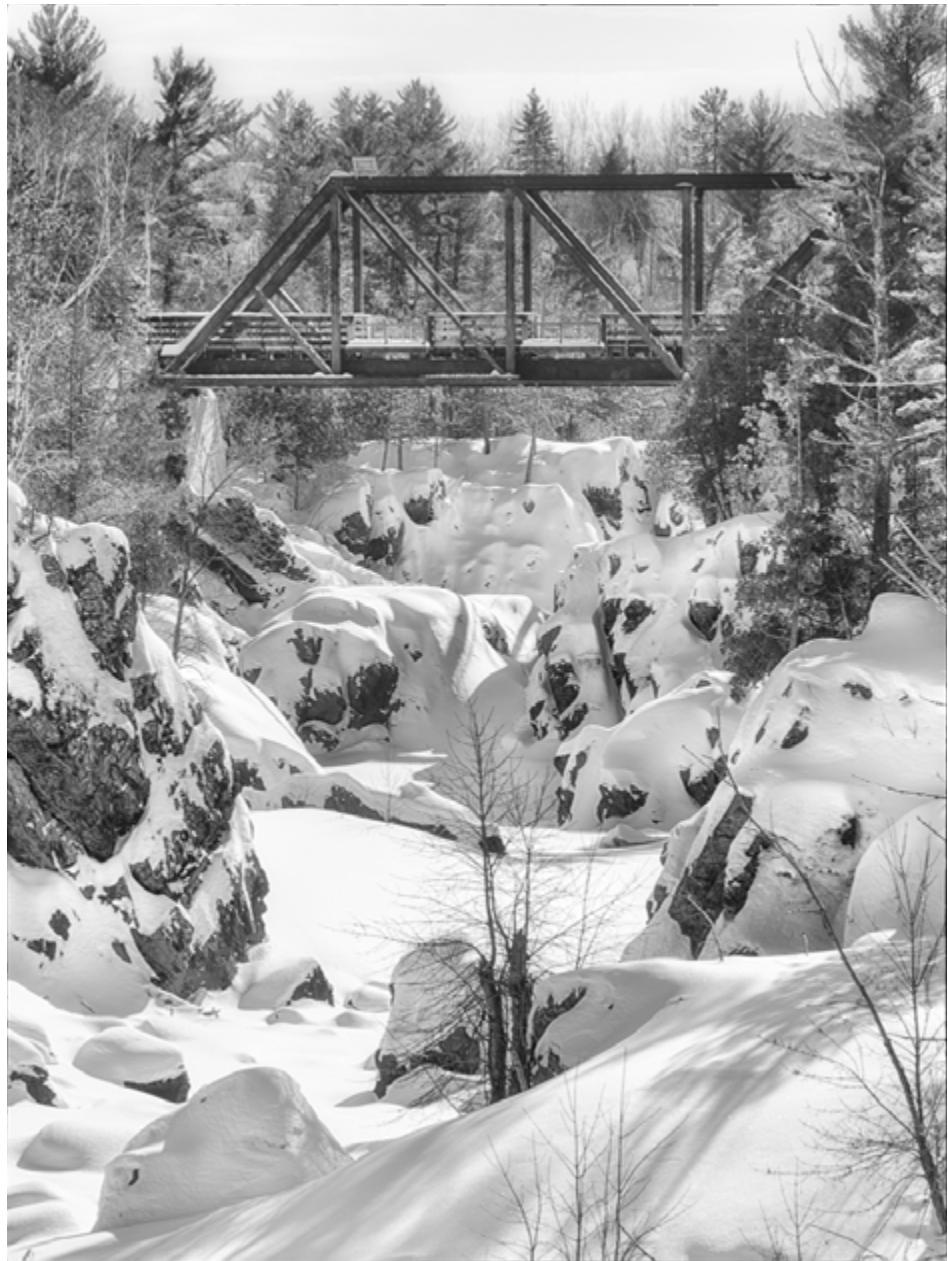
She feels love, not romantic, not blissful, or even passionate, but the subtle love of a sister,

A sister who will never again forget, and a brother who never has.

OLIVIA JACKSON

Broken Window





SHAYLYN JOHNSON

A Day of Fall



I laugh. I laugh at the rat. I laugh at the rat as he sits upon his haunches. I laugh at the rat as he stares disdainfully down at me from his lofty perch of the rafter. I laugh to fill the small space I call my own. I laugh to keep the walls with their moldy yellow wallpaper from closing in and crushing me. I laugh until my lungs burn and I taste blood. I laugh as the rat does not move. I laugh until I fall asleep on the ragged mattress I call my bed; until the rat is lost to the encroaching darkness of my skin.

I wake up groggy as I always do. Sitting up with my sweaty palm pressed to my sweaty forehead, I contemplate my surroundings. Never changing, but always decaying. Yellow, older than myself, is the predominant sensation. It had grown sallow, stained, discolored, and ugly like the skin of an old man's corpse. It was unsettling.

The lack of windows offered no relief in my discomfort. There was no entrance or exit. How did I get here? The walls are smooth. How did I get here? The ceiling is whole. How did I get here?

How did the rat get here?

I feel my mind lean over the edge, ready to fall into the pits of madness, when the wind blows me back to a safer position. I don't know what this wind is, but it has managed to push me back to sanity more times than I can count. What is it? I wish it'd speed my descent instead of impeding it.

Resignation.

There was only my bed. Nothing more in my room. My hell was empty except for the one grace heaven attempted to give me. No closet, I wore the same clothes always. They never faded or dirtied. There was no table, I didn't eat. I never grew thin or hungry.

I had tried to write before, on the walls. Tried to copy The Raven from memory on the wall. I have no pen, no ink, no pencil, not even charcoal. I decided blood would have to do. Scratched, bit, clawed my fingers, my arms, anywhere. There was no blood.

I was never a religious man, but perhaps I am in limbo or purgatory. Maybe God needs me to suffer more before I enter his kingdom.

I don't remember dying. I only remember the general characteristics of myself. No childhood, no life. Yet, I know I am human. What is human? I've never seen one. I've never seen myself. Somehow, I know I am one.

Fatigued.

I rise from the bed. I begin my routine. I walk along one wall, reaching the corner I turn and follow the next wall. I do this again. Again. Again. Again. My legs never tire. I only stop when I get one of the feelings.

I don't know where the feelings come from, but I know my only choice is to obey them. I don't need sleep, but a feeling will tell me to sleep. Then I sleep.

As far as I can tell, time has no grasp on me. I never change, my hair and nails don't grow. Time must exist here. The walls are decaying, I think. Time is a requisite for decay, right?

I never touch the wall in my structured wandering.

I have gone around the room two hundred seventy-four and three quarters times now. From one end of a wall to the other is ten steps. That is ten thousand nine hundred ninety steps.

I stop.

I hear a few scurrying steps above me. More than the sound, I feel the cursed vermin. He watches.

I continue.

I ignore the devilish eyes that bore into my head. I ignore the black miasma radiating from the beast. I know this creature is of that infernal abyss. No. I know this creature is the infernal abyss. The creature is of me. No. Is me.

I am unfamiliar with stress, and with how the body reacts to it. I feel no different. However, I have increased the speed that I walk around the room.

I start to run.

I can't run from the rat because there is nowhere I can run. The faster I run, the more often I come to the point from which I started running. My actions are irrational, but I continue.

The rat watches.

As I have come to expect, the feeling comes. It usually follows the rat. Does

the rat lead it? I come slowly to a stop. I lie on the bed.

The rat is gone.

Sometimes I hear voices. Voices which aren't my own. They're never clear. They're muffled. The words turn to a slush of sound. A muffled whisper, the last words of a man being smothered with a pillow. I don't know where the voices come from. They seem to just seep out of the wall, but I feel as if it is from myself that they originate. Am I mad?

What is it? What is it that the damn raven said? Never? No. Nevermore. Yes. The Raven, written by a human I believe. I remember nothing, but I know this. I know this poem. I can't forget it. I won't forget it. The words hurt, but they have some meaning. Words have meaning. I connect some part of myself to the words. Am I the words? Are the words me? My thoughts aren't stable, the words are. They are orderly and I am not.

Disoriented.

What is dying? A vague concept occupies my brain. Death. Life. One is terminal. One eternal. I experience some sort of emptiness in my chest. Is this a new feeling?

Hollow.

I feel hollow. This feeling is odd. Feelings are not like this. Feelings are sudden. I obey feelings. I can't obey this. There's nothing to obey. What do I do?

I sense the rat. The bloody bastard. The song of silence radiating from the chamber of my torso is different than the black music the rat produces. The rat usually causes such an uproar within me, I assume they will cancel each other out. They create painful harmony instead.

I curl up as tight as I can on the bed.

No.

No.

Pain.

Sleep.

No.

I Laugh | **KIERNAN MCFADDEN**

Suffer.

Forever.

I want the feeling. I want it, so I can sleep.

I don't sleep.

How far have I walked? If I laid straight all my steps, where would they end?

Would they be enough to escape this place? They haven't sufficed so far. There is no escape. No escape by walking at least. The rat must be able to escape. It is not trapped here. It is only here when it so desires to be. Can I learn this miracle from the rat? That black vermin would never aid me. I can only imagine that it gets a certain pleasure by torturing me. It must be a sadistic thing, not unlike humans if they put me here.

What is madness? Am I mad? My memory is not a straight line, nor is it whole. Everything comes in pieces. My thoughts are so scattered. It's as if my brain is composed of thousands of moving parts, but each part moves independently from the others. Nothing is connected. My experience adds up to nothing. The whole is not the sum. The whole is less.

The voices. I laugh at them. They are nothing.

The walls. I laugh at them. They are nothing.

The bed. I laugh at it. It is nothing.

Almost every time I laugh the feeling finds me. It doesn't like my laughter. Is it too loud? I think the feeling wants me to be wholly dependent. When I laugh, some weight escapes my chest through that ugly chuckle. The feeling wants that weight to remain where it is. The hands of Atlas are nailed to the sky.

I can't be alive. This isn't life. I can only imagine that some afterlife is where I am. Maybe I'm before life. In transition. Before I was alive, I must've been somewhere. After I've lived, I have to go somewhere. Maybe this is God's mind, filled with millions of identical rooms. God is sadistic. Man is made in God's image. Man is sadistic. The rat? The rat is God. The rat is God trying to prevent another Lucifer rising from the ranks of men. The feeling is just the will of the rat. Men are slaves. Worse. Men are slaves with a will of their own.

The rat is God.

I am Lucifer.

Dark. I see dark. I open my eyes. I see dark. Dark.

I'm waiting. The rat will come sometime. It must. It would not fail me now. I will escape.

Melancholy.

The wind could not stop me. It was pushing against me with the force of a hurricane. I would fall at any cost. If I fell, I could be free.

The rat moves. Slowly, it comes across the rafter.

I jump.

The rat is on the floor.

I, too, come to the floor. The rat tries to escape, but only half-heartedly.

Maybe it only seems slow because I know every possible step that can be taken in this cell. I seize the rat.

Jubilation.

I don't know what to do. The feeling is attempting to take control of my whole body, but I won't let it. Not this time.

I squeeze the thing I hold in my hands. I hear cracking, snapping bones. I drop the broken rat. Blood begins to stream out of the minuscule body. The blood is black. It pools at the edge of the floor until it slowly courses up the wall.

I can feel the doorway of blood. The feeling is overwhelming. I don't know how I've held it off this long. The doorway is cold. Where does it lead? I don't know. No. I know. It will take me away from here. That is all I want. I enter the black.

Bliss.

"What's happening?!"

"Two-seven-four is dying, sir."

"Has there been a malfunction in the life systems?"

"No, life systems are operating at full capacity. It appears that the failure in the subject is originating in the brain."

I Laugh | **KIERNAN MCFADDEN**

“Damn it! How can this be?”

“Could it be the anomaly, sir?”

“Perhaps. Is there any way we can save this poor bastard?”

“We’re running mandatory shutdown commands and stabilizing commands.

The neurotransmitters are at maximum potency. Anymore and we would kill him.”

“This can’t happen! I will not be the first commanding researcher to turn up a dead subject!”

“Subject two-seven-four’s heart has ceased. Brain has gone dark.

All activity has ceased. Mark time of death as seventeen fifty-one, January nineteenth, two thousand sixty-seven.”

“Praier, fill out the final report. I want it on my desk in an hour.”

“It will be done, sir.”

“I’ll be in my office. No one bother me.”

Status Report

Form #586

Research Unit: F3707

Subject: 274

Researcher: Johnathon Praier

Identification Number: 10990

Subject Status: Deceased

Date: 01/19/2067

Subject 274, after three years of being under the Ibormeith Artificial Reality System, has died.

Subject 274 died in an abnormal fashion. All life systems operating continuously on their body showed no signs of malfunction. Instead the brain itself, without any physical damage, first ceased activity. All major organs failed after the brain ceased activity.

Throughout 274’s research, an anomaly has appeared on multiple occasions. The abnormal brain activity recorded was caused by the subject perceiving something in the AR that was not directly sent into the subject’s nervous system

by the IAR System.

Similar cases have been reported prior to 274's, which led to insanity. 274 was a volunteer designated to study how an AR could cause such insanity.

The study used shut down and stabilizing commands to deal with any signs of instability. These seem to have kept the subject from falling into complete insanity, but in the long run only slowed the deterioration of the subject's conscious.

Report Conclusion:

Research inconclusive.

COLTON MERTES

Olive Simulation





Ordeal by Cheque | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK****10:31 AM****September 2nd, 1903****Hollywood Hospital**

Something could go wrong. Miscarriage, bleeding out, a stillborn...oh, God, a stillborn. Please don't let it be a stillborn.

Lawrence Exeter was thinking of every possible situation that could go wrong in the birth of his child as he sat in the cold waiting room. The chairs felt like steel, and he kept shifting, never able to find a comfortable position. Not that he was paying much attention. He was too busy going through everything he'd read on parenthood and children, trying to prepare himself for every possible situation. The books were all jumbles in his head, words that wove together and then apart again, trying to make sense of his worry.

He finally gave up on trying to sit still and stood on his long legs, beginning to pace up and down the narrow aisle. The only things he could hear were the quiet murmur behind the counter, occasional monitor beeping, and the sound of his own boots clacking on the hard floor. Did it usually take this long to give birth?

The man actually laughed a little, and out loud he said, "How would you know? You've never given birth." He shook his head at himself, but the small moment of ease soon faded and he was back to walking.

To the left. Miscarriage.

To the right. Stillborn.

To the left. Bleeding.

To the right. "Sir?"

Lawrence spun around so quick he nearly fell over. A nurse stood peeking out from around the corner, and he recognized her vaguely from talking to him when they had come in however long before, rushed and panting and panicked. Her big brown eyes seemed way too calm as watched him. Then she nodded towards where she had come from. "Your baby has been born."

Relief filled the man's chest like a dam had been broken. He became shaky with relief and grabbed the nearest chair to lean on and steady himself. "Thank God. Can I—"

"Yes, yes." She waved her hand for him to follow her as she disappeared from his view around the corner once more. On wobbly legs Lawrence Exeter followed the woman in white, down a hallway that he noticed was a dark blue color. Why had he never seen

that before? His gait slowed, and he dropped behind the nurse, his eyes catching on every little detail—the scratch there, the framed degree there. He was about to go see his baby. His baby.

“Sir?”

The nurse’s voice seemed far away, like an echo in a canyon that Lawrence was at the bottom of. A dark blue canyon, in fact, that was slowly closing in on him, squeezing his lungs, his vision tunneling...

“Sir, do you want to see your baby? They’re waiting for you.”

Suddenly the shrinking stopped. Everything bounced back into place, as if it was a spring that had been let go, and the man closed his eyes, pressing his fingers to his temples. He was standing in the hallway of Hollywood Hospital, it was sometime in the morning, and the love of his life had just given birth to the next love of his life.

“Yes,” he told the nurse. “Yes, I do.”

The baby was the most perfect thing that Lawrence Exeter had ever seen, other than the woman lying in the hospital bed, who was pale and tired but happy nonetheless. The two sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity. The world had stopped spinning; it was only Lawrence, Daisy, and little Lawrence Jr., still and silent despite just coming out a few minutes before. His little eyes were wide and his hand clenched and unclenched around his father’s finger.

He signed the check half an hour later. They wanted a payment right away, of course, and Lawrence complied, much too happy to even think. As he slipped the brown fold back into his pocket, a little part of his humanity slid with it, because he couldn’t help but feel the sense of power while the black ink swirled over the paper in his signature.

5:57 PM October 3rd, 1903 House of Lawrence Exeter & Daisy Windsor

The weather outside quite matched his mood.

How ridiculously poetic. Fat drops of rain fell on the old roof, the sound nearly deafening for the two young people on the old beige couch. The young woman lay with her blue eyes half-open, her slender hand like ice in the larger one of Lawrence Exeter, who was perched on the edge and barely breathing. All the books he’d read didn’t prepare him for this. For the love of his life lying pale and sick on the couch his parents had given him because they were going to sell it anyway, under the roof that he could

Ordeal by Cheque | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

barely afford with the funds he had saved.

Something was wrong, and Daisy could feel it. It had started that morning—she had almost fallen because of a sudden spell of dizziness, and she wasn't hungry like she usually was. The feelings only became increasingly worse until she found herself unable to rise from the couch she had only meant to take a quick rest on. As she lay there now, she could barely open her eyes. Her lids felt heavy and her hands were numb.

She managed to croak out a question: "Is the baby okay?"

Lawrence was alarmed to hear any words from her, but he quickly glanced over at the crib to check. The little angel was sleeping safe and sound, and Lawrence quickly said, "Yes, Love. He's fine." Where is that doctor? Does he not have a watch?

Just then the knock came. Giving Daisy a quick squeeze and reassurance he would be back, he jumped up, reaching the door in less than three strides. The man standing there nearly made him take a step back, but he managed to refrain himself. "Doctor."

The wiry man in front of him gave him a jerky nod, stepping in. Water dripped off of his long coat and onto the carpet, and Lawrence bit back a remark as he shut the door behind them—maybe a little too loudly. He watched as the doctor yanked off his coat and stepped spasmodically out of his boots. "Beautiful evening, is it not?"

He didn't sound like he was joking, so Lawrence said, "Okay."

Dr. McCoy craned his long neck around the coat rack to see into the living room, then took some choppy steps forward so he was beside the couch. He pressed his large glasses up with his pinky finger and tried not to smile at his own thoughts. So many young people over-exaggerated when it came to childbirth. He was already almost positive the young woman was just fine. Nevertheless, he kneeled down beside her. "What are your symptoms?"

Lawrence made his way quickly over as well, standing slightly in-between the doctor and his wife. Paranoia was taking over his brain as he replied in a clipped tone. "She's dizzy and she has a bad stomach ache. I'm scared it has something to do with—"

"Having the baby. Yes, I know." David knew he sounded bored as he felt the young woman's forehead. It was slightly warmer than normal body temperature, but nothing fatal. If it's not fatal, it's not worth it. He gently pressed on her stomach as well, all the while feeling for odd lumps or grumbles.

After a few more excruciating minutes of Lawrence watching, he finally blurted, "Are

you done?"

His voice was so hard it startled the doctor, Daisy, and the baby at once. The baby began to voice his concerns and cry, Daisy attempted to sit up, and the doctor said, "No need to get snappy."

Lawrence took a deep and calming breath, though he was nothing of the sort, and gently pushed Daisy back down before striding over to the crib. Lawrence Exeter Jr.'s eyes were scrunched up and his small arms flailed as the new father gently picked up the baby in his arms. He felt dread at the look of distress on the baby's face, and he did his best to rock him, muttering, "It's okay. I'm sorry."

Dr. McCoy watched on, shaking his head on his spindly neck as he stood from the side of the couch. He could already tell the man in front of him was in for a long struggle. "The young lady will be fine, Exeter. It's normal to have some side effects after birth." The words came out of his mouth in a mechanical manner as he reached into his bag, his jumpy fingers feeling around before pulling out a small brown bottle. He tried hard once again not to smile to himself, knowing the charge would most likely pay for his next few meals. "This should take care of any uneasiness."

Lawrence set his now quieter baby back down before striding over and snatching the bottle from the doctor's hands. His patience had worn thin with Mr. David McCoy. However, he didn't want Daisy to worry about the cost. They had enough on their shoulders. "I'll walk you out," Lawrence said sharply, making it clear he did not want to discuss in the immediate range.

Once the two men were outside, Mr. McCoy slid his long arms into the jacket still dripping water. His big glasses had specks of rain water from just standing under the small awning outside, which made the illusion of his huge eyes even more unnerving. "I hope you know there will be a charge," he told the young man leaning against his front door.

Mr. Exeter slid his hand into his warm pocket and pulled out his brown checkbook. "Let's make it quick. I have to get back to my baby."

"Four hundred seventy five."

The young man stared at the other with complete disbelief on his face. "Come again?"

"Four hundred and seventy five dollars," David repeated, a toothy grin on his face

Ordeal by Cheque | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

for the first time that day. Lawrence couldn't help but look at the gap on the right side of his mouth where his incisor should be as the doctor added, "and do write neatly, wouldn't you?"

Lawrence didn't have much of a choice but to write the check. The pen felt slightly heavier in his hand, but as he ripped out the paper and handed it over, he had a sense of power flow through him, even though a doctor he could barely stand was walking away with nearly five hundred dollars of his money. It was a feeling of something that would later cost Lawrence Exeter his life.

As Dr. David McCoy drove away, little did he know that he would not see Lawrence Exeter again until much, much later—for the last time.

7:12 AM June 1st, 1923 Hometown of Lawrence Exeter & Daisy Windsor

"Are you absolutely sure you'll be alright?"

"I'll be fine, Lawrence."

"Do you have your bags?"

"Yes."

"Extra money?"

"Lawrence, yes! I'll be fine."

An uneasy feeling channeled a thousand different questions from Lawrence Exeter as he stood on his porch with Daisy. The past 20 years had been good; Lawrence was in a secure job as a lawyer that paid well, and Daisy sewed for a high-end dress company. Their son Lawrence Jr. was now away at college, making his parents proud.

Daisy was supposed to leave for a sewing conference in another state, and Lawrence Sr. was an absolute wreck. They had barely left each other's side since their son was born. Their marriage a couple years later—when they'd finally saved the funds—had completely tied the knot. Being in a different state was a new experience for both of them, and Lawrence was taking it quite hard.

"I don't want you to go," the man said seriously. His eyes had not become any more dull with age, and they still stared intently at her as his hand held hers. The chilled morning air swept across both of their faces, causing a strand of Daisy's hair

to fold gently across her nose. She only smiled as he brushed it off for her. “I’ll be fine. It’s only a couple of days.”

Lawrence hesitated. He wanted to push on more, of course, and pick apart everything she could have forgotten, but he restrained himself. She was a perfectly capable woman and could handle herself.

“Here,” he said finally, sliding an already-written check from his pocket to her hand. Her skin felt alarmingly cold on his, and once again his stomach gave an uneasy churn. Something isn’t right.

Daisy’s eyes went wide when her eyes landed on the check her husband handed to her. “Lawrence!” she stammered weakly, tearing her eyes away from the paper and putting them on his. “This is—this is unreasonable! Twenty five thou—”

“It’s for emergency,” he insisted. “You won’t have to use all of it. But if something happens, I want you prepared. Please, just take it.”

“Whatever would happen that I’d need this much?”

“I’d rather not think about that.”

The two stood in the morning silence for a while. The sun peeked over the trees as if it were checking for the all-clear, the sky only beginning to lighten, dawn just creeping in.

The peacefulness was interrupted by the rumble of a car engine slowly approaching. As Daisy snapped out of her daze, she spotted a black car rolling slowly towards their house. “There she is.”

Lawrence was filled with dread as he helped his wife load her bags in the trunk of the car, said hi to the driver, and finally helped her inside. He bent down to the open window to see her face, soaking in the sight of her pale eyes and sweet smile.

“Be safe, won’t you?” he asked her quietly.

“I will,” she told him gently. Her hands brushed his face before he forced himself to stand back. He watched it roll slowly out of view and then stared at the spot where it had disappeared. He wasn’t sure how long he stood there and watched, as if he were waiting for it to come back, but it never did.

By the time he shifted his gaze to the horizon, the sun was nearly fully visible. The sky was a combination of purple and pink, and the birds began to chirp, no

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doubt ready to start the day. Despite the nature around him, he couldn't help but feel empty and sad, though he couldn't figure out why.

Finally he retreated back to his house, shutting the door and closing him off from the world.

~

Thirty miles away, a car was in a wreck. A tire was thrown across the road; the fender was bent and bloody. The driver was hunched over the steering wheel, no doubt dead. The woman in the passenger seat had been thrown at a particularly gruesome angle and lay on the asphalt, no breath in her lungs. Smoke rose from the back of the car with bad brakes and low gas, skid marks strewn across the road.

Daisy Windsor had died in such a comfortable position, you would have thought she was only resting. She lay on the pavement in front of the open door—a vain attempt to jump and save herself. Her pale hair was strewn around her as if it had been styled that way and in her white-gloved hand sat a check addressed to "Miss Daisy Windsor"—twenty-five thousand dollars that would never be used by the woman lying in the street.

3:30 AM**June 9th, 1923****The train station**

"A one way ticket. I don't care where it's going or how much it is, as long as I get out of here. I don't ever want to see this blasted town again."

The words were spoken by Lawrence Exeter Sr. at three thirty in the morning a week after his wife's death. The week had been spent cooped up in his house and never leaving. Even when the local police came to his door to tell him the news, he didn't leave the house; instead he drowned himself in an old flask of whiskey. He couldn't remember the last time he'd consumed alcohol and the effects got to him the next day. It was just as well with him. The tears didn't hurt as much.

As he sat on a bench and awaited the next train to nowhere, his bloodshot eyes could not focus. His hand still shook from signing the check a few minutes before—made out to something French for five hundred and eighty five dollars. It was a small fee to pay for leaving. His hands clenched and unclenched on the handle of his small duffel bag, consisting of nothing but a few extra shirts, one more pair of

shoes, a photograph, an extra flask of whatever was in his cellar, and of course his checkbook. The rest of his belongings still sat untouched in his abandoned house. He hadn't told anyone about his leaving. All he knew was the police had notified his son, who had tried to call him multiple times, but Lawrence couldn't make himself pick up the phone. He was at a complete loss for humanity.

Boarding the train, Lawrence found a seat in the back. He didn't even watch out the window; instead, he put his head back and closed his eyes, trying to forget everything as it pulled out of the station. The five hundred and eighty five dollars was about to change his life in a much more expensive way.

1:21 PM November 21st, 1926 Stanford University Dorm

Plink.

Knock.

Plink.

Knock.

Plink.

Knock.

The noises came rhythmically to the ears of Lawrence Exeter Jr. as he sat at his dorm window, overlooking the city of Stanford. It was raining while the sun was still shining, and he had been contemplating that fact for the past hour or so, ignoring the looming deadlines and papers next to him on his desk. He had no drive to finish them, anyway. He had much more pressing matters on his mind, such as why it was raining but sunny at the same time.

Finally registering there was knocking on his door, he slowly stood, tearing his brown eyes away from the outside for the first time in an hour. He stumbled slightly, getting his balance, and then made his way to his worn down door. He didn't have the faintest idea who could be visiting him, since he hardly went out any more. His life consisted of his homework and wallowing in self-pity. He ran a hand briefly through his dirty blonde locks before turning the knob and pulling it open.

In front of him stood a young woman around his age. Without wasting any time, she held out her hand, which had a letter in-between the slender fingers. "This is a delivery."

Ordeal by Cheque | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

“Why wasn’t it dropped in the mail room?” Lawrence Jr. dead-panned as he took it out of the young woman’s hands. It felt coarse against his skin and sent goosebumps up his arms, though for what reason he could not explain as she answered, “It said in the note it had to be specifically delivered to you.” She gave a nonchalant shrug before turning and trotting off.

Lawrence stared at the envelope in his hand as he closed the door behind her. When he flipped it over to read the writing on the front, he had to steady himself on his nearby bed.

The script was clearly his father’s. Even after three years, the picture was burned into his brain, etched there forever, of what the handwriting of Lawrence Exeter Sr. looked like. The looping words and fancy curly q’s made Lawrence Jr.’s stomach turn over and follow their path, winding up and down and sideways. He could barely move his trembling hand enough to tear open the neatly closed flap and pull out the papers inside.

The first one was a note with even more of his father’s script scrawled on it that read:

I hope this helps with tuition and whatever else you may need.

I wish you well and success.

Lawrence Exeter Sr.

His eyes remained glued on the page, re-reading the words over and over and over again, trying to process what they said. They sounded so rigid, so formal. Certainly not appropriate for a father that left his son in Stanford and was somewhere in Hawaii. Certainly not appropriate for a father who had lost all contact with his son the past three years. Certainly not appropriate for a father who couldn’t even tell his son his mother had died himself. Certainly not appropriate for a father—

Lawrence ripped the note in half.

For a moment there was just the sound of his labored breathing and the wind outside pushing and pulling his dorm room as he sat, staring at the now jagged pieces of paper in his hands. The writing was still too visible for his taste. His shaking fingers tore it again, now in fourths. Still too visible. He kept ripping the note in halves, reducing it more and more until he had a pile of scraps around his feet—

nothing but paper with meaningless ink. Tears from his eyes dropped onto the pile, smudging the writing. “He always thought he could fix it with money,” he said out loud, his voice broken and cracking as he told the peeling wallpaper. “He always thought that was the solution. Does this look like a solution?”

It wasn’t until later that he remembered the second piece of paper—a check for two hundred thousand dollars. That made him good as rich, but it was not joy that filled his heart. As he stared outside, he realized the rain had stopped and it was only the sun shining brightly now. How ridiculously ironic.

9:58 PM

July 1st, 1931

An empty alley

“I’m in the mood for some pasta.”

The voice came from the back right corner and made Lawrence Jr. jump a foot high. There had been no movement in the alley for the past ten grueling minutes as Lawrence had waited alone. As he turned towards the source of the noise, he braced himself for the sight that followed. “You scared the living daylights out of me, Spagoni.”

“We’re on a last name basis now, eh?” A man emerged out of the shadows wearing an evil smirk. A good eight inches taller than Lawrence, he towered over him, his rat-like features twitching as if he thought he was funny. “Bit more formal than the last time.”

“Last time I saw you, I was ordering ten dollars’ worth of ravioli,” Lawrence said, shifting on his feet uneasily. The wind was whipping so hard that he had to plant his feet firmly on the ground to keep from keeling over. He was surprised that Tony, as slender and skinny as he was, was not flapping through the wind like a stray hat.

Tony nodded as he pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. Instead of answering, he held it out. “Care for a smoke?” He could tell that Lawrence was more than nervous in the situation. His clients always were at the beginning of a meeting, but he found that cigarettes lightened the mood. As he offered up the pack, he couldn’t help but notice the man’s similarity to his father. Oh, yes. Of course he knew Lawrence Exeter Sr.—the man made of money.

Lawrence exhaled through his nose as the sun went behind a cloud, reducing the lighting even more of the already darkened alleyway. “I care to get this done and

Ordeal by Cheque | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

leave.”

“Suit yourself.” Tony whipped one out for himself and set it in between his thin lips. Lawrence was almost positive a light would never stay in this wind, but the match Tony lit worked enough to coax smoke from the cigarette. He took a long drag and then let it out, looking much too comfortable for Lawrence’s taste. “Well, let’s get on with it, then.”

A sick feeling was starting in the pit of Lawrence’s stomach. “Well?”

“You want me to murder your father.”

Just hearing the words spoken out loud made the pit of the man’s stomach grow to the size of a basketball. Of course that’s what he’d called Tony there for, but hearing them from the mouth of the murderer sent chills directly to his core. He shifted uneasily again and winced. His muscles had been so tense they’d started to hurt, especially in his tersely crossed arms. Slowly he rolled his shoulders as he forced out a response: “You already know that. Just tell me what I need to do.”

“You’re sure you’ve thought this through?” Tony asked him, and, seeing the surprised expression on Lawrence’s face, he added, “I’m just making sure, old friend. Murder is no light nor easy task. It takes care of one problem, but stems a garden of new ones.”

“I don’t remember you being such a poet,” Lawrence said, but the humor had drained out of his voice and it sounded grainy. The words seemed to be grabbed away by the wind that was picking up again, and as Lawrence looked up at the sky, the cloud covering the sun drifted away, lighting the world once more. It reminded him of the day he’d received his check in the mail from the father that never cared—how he had sat at his window and contemplated why it was sunny and raining at the same time. The memory filled him with hate, and with the sun shining down brightly he said, “Tell me how much.”

“A hundred prepayment and a hundred after,” Tony Spagni said simply. Before Lawrence could protest he said, “Pasta in the daytime, murders at night. A guy’s gotta make a living.”

There, in a dark alleyway of his hometown, Lawrence Exeter Jr. signed a check

for one hundred dollars, and then another, the sunlight blinding against the white paper.

He finally understood how it could rain and be sunny at the same time.

7:13 AM July 15th, 1931 The home of Lawrence Exeter Sr.

The weather outside still matched his mood.

Even after how many years, he found it pathetically poetic. Rain drizzled off the roof of his first house as he lay on the same beige couch, unmoving, simply listening to the water fall from the sky. He and Daisy had sold it when they'd moved, of course, but nobody had bought it since, and Lawrence figured it was the perfect quiet place for a doctor to check him and leave. A fuss in this town is the last thing I need.

It hurt him to move. He'd noticed it a few days before—his stomach was churning and there was pain in his esophagus. He figured it must have been heartburn—normal for a man his age—until it began to worsen. Refusing to allow any doctors in Hawaii to tend to him, he took a steamboat, then a couple trains back home, all the while becoming weaker and weaker. He had barely made it to his old house without collapsing somewhere along the way. Something was gravely wrong, and Lawrence Exeter Sr. knew it.

As it was, he nearly died from a heart attack instead. When he shifted his eyes from the ceiling to the doorway, there was a figure looming there, tall and hidden in shadow from the poorly lit room. If he hadn't been expecting someone, he would have thrown the nearest object, but after the initial shock, he knew exactly who it was.

"Knock next time, won't you?" Lawrence said quietly, before erupting in a coughing fit.

Dr. David McCoy didn't answer his old friend right away. When he'd received the phone call the day before, he'd been both surprised and concerned. If Lawrence was voluntarily coming back to the town, there was something very wrong—fatally wrong.

The doctor took another spasmodic step inside of the room, illuminating his

Ordeal by Cheque | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

features a little bit more. Lawrence never failed to be unnerved by the doctor's big eyes. His glasses were the same round frames that seemed to make his eyes pop out of his head, and his movements were still jerky and unnerving. The thought of it was almost amusing to Lawrence. Almost.

"I did knock," Dr. McCoy said. As he bent down to set down his bag, the light caught his now graying hair. "It's raining fairly hard and you're an old man, Lawrence. Hearing declines with age."

"Apparently, so does overall health," Lawrence answered him. The burning in his stomach and esophagus was worsening, and when David looked at the man lying on the couch, he saw the skin of a dying person—sickly, pale, and hollow. A sinking feeling set in the pit of the doctor's stomach for the first time in a long time. Doctors could not have feelings for their clients; they would waste away much too quickly from heartache. But looking at Lawrence Exeter, he could see that he would not last long.

Luckily, he'd had years of experience hiding his feelings. Instead of telling his old friend, he reached into his doctor's bag and pulled out equipment to begin his testing. He peppered him with the normal questions—how often do you experience your symptoms? What are side effects you've been feeling? What's your diet look like? Are you getting the right amount of exercise? All the while, the doctor was drawing blood and examining it.

Lawrence knew something was wrong. Dr. McCoy had a way of being mechanical, yes, but even this was extensive. The questions he was asking were a little bit too "normal" for the doctor. As the rain continued to bang on the old roof, Lawrence closed his eyes and listened to the rhythmic patterning. The last time he was in this position, Daisy was sick. Now it was him. He had the strange urge to smile at the bitterness of the memory.

"I have bad news."

Lawrence's eyes snapped open as he looked at the doctor. He'd never seen him look so distressed. "What is it, David?"

The doctor didn't meet his old friend's eyes as he slowly cleaned off his

syringe. The next words were weighted and scraped against the floor of his mouth as they dragged out slowly. "Poison. Most likely in a drink or food. You'll be dead by morning."

The chest of Lawrence Exeter Jr. seemed to expand to a point where it could not be contained any more. The walls began to close in on him. You'll be dead by morning. He'd expected it, he supposed. So why did it hurt so much?

"Who could've..."

"That, I cannot answer." Dr. McCoy's voice was heavy as he stood slowly, picking up his briefcase. Lawrence noticed that the movements were no longer jerky. "I'm sorry, old friend. I didn't want this for you." He shook his head slowly. "And to think the last time I came, I was taking care of your wife and your new baby."

Lawrence was feeling so much pain that it was nearly unbearable to pull out his checkbook and sign a check, despite the doctor's protests. As he handed it to him with shaky fingers, Lawrence said, "It's the least I can do. A last favor."

A last favor.

In the pouring down rain in the middle of July, Dr. David McCoy drove off with his hand holding the last check Lawrence Exeter would ever write.

6:34 PM

July 16th, 1931

The mortuary

It's over.

Lawrence Exeter Jr. stood in front of the Hollywood Mortuary, checkbook in hand and rooted to the spot. He'd gotten the call from his father last night, but he couldn't bear to answer. Instead he called the hospital and told them to send somebody out and stay with him. I'm just as bad as he was, not able to tell me about my mother's death. But at least that wasn't his fault.

A car honked behind him, spurring him into motion. He stumbled out of the street and through the front doors, immediately hit with the stench of anti-infective spray. Fighting down the urge to vomit, he stumbled his way to the front desk, mumbling out something about his father. His head was spinning so much the woman had to repeat her question a few times before he could process it: "Would

Ordeal by Cheque | **SAMANTHA MRAZEK**

you like to say goodbye?"

Before he knew it he was following a woman down a hallway with rows of big metal doors. He felt like he really would throw up on the clean marble floor, but he didn't have the time. The woman opened the nearest door to him and ushered him inside.

Lawrence Jr. did not have time to prepare himself. He stood in front of his dead father, his eyes trained on his wrinkled face. Had his skin always been so pale? It was almost see-through. He realized vaguely his eyes were closed. Of course they were. Did he expect to see them? His throat began to swell shut and his vision became blurry until he was sobbing quietly over his father's body. The sound echoed around the small room, filling his ears and the small space with the sorrow.

He left a few minutes later. With his eyes puffy, he didn't look back, instead walking out and continuing to go. His tears were gone now. It had to be done. He repeated that thought to himself as he made his way back to the front.

As his hand moved to sign the check, he realized he didn't ever have to sign "Jr." at the end any more. Walking out, leaving his father behind for the last time, Lawrence Exeter said something to himself that he would remember for the rest of his life.

"He always fixed his problems with money. That means I can too."



OLIVIA JACKSON

Tattoo Triptych



Distant scream.

“Oh what now?” I say to myself as I continue sweeping the stairs. Honestly, I should be terrified, but I’m used to it. My name is TJ. I work at Sauin University as a “custodial technician” (they don’t like it if we call ourselves janitors). This is a small university, but there are a surprising number of students.

I’ve only been here a few months, but this place is something else. I may do the same thing every day, but this place is never the same. In my time here I have seen a lot. I was only terrified the first time. Because after that I noticed that the strange beings here don’t seem to notice me. I’m still too scared to step in, I mostly take the role of the bystander. I feel like a coward, but I don’t think I’ll ever step in. Watching everything play out is my way of helping in that I journal how everything plays out. I feel maybe one day it could help someone.

As I finish sweeping the stairs, I hear another scream.

“I think it’s coming from the lecture hall upstairs,” I mutter to myself. Those screams happen a lot around the university, but not many people are actually harmed or go missing. At Least as far as all the outsiders that come to campus think. I don’t know how there aren’t any missing person reports. The people of this area cover it up I think.

I decide to see who or what is screaming. This place can be a maze sometimes, I would have hated to work on the construction of this place. The architect was a mad man. I would almost compare this place to the Winchester House, maybe its twists and turns were made for the same reason. Someone could get lost and not be seen again for weeks in this place.

As I round the corner I see the large window in the back of the lecture hall, and I hear what I thought was a scream but it seems to be more of a wailing/crying/

TJ and the Banshee | **TRISTAN PIERCE**

moaning coming from the front of the hall. I look towards the sound and see a transparent woman with a green shawl. From the little research I've done since being employed here, I'd have to assume she is a Banshee. I would be worried because it's commonly thought to be a bad omen, but I've learned from my research that they are only meant for certain Irish clans. Her moans continue and I wonder why she's here in this lecture hall.

I realize I've been here too long and that I have halls to vacuum. On my way to my supply room I pass by a few of the offices and I notice prof. Kavanagh. I think he uses the lecture hall the most, maybe he's the one she is keening for. But it could be all coincidence and I could be overthinking it.

The next day I walk into building D, it's the one I'm cleaning for the day and I can't get the Banshee off my mind. While I mop the lower level halls, I decide I'm going to spend my break in the library. I spend a lot of time in the library, there's only one area that has the type of books I need. It's usually very quiet—not many people are interested in this type of stuff. I finally find a book of Irish folklore to try to ward off the Banshee, just so I don't directly involve myself. I spend my whole break with my nose in this book, but I find nothing. "Maybe I should tell him what I saw in the lecture hall," I say to no one.

I finish up cleaning the windows and I decide to end my day. On my way to my supply room I pass by Kavanagh's office again. I see him sitting at his desk looking annoyed while he grades papers. He seems like he is having a rough day already. I decide to leave him alone. "I doubt he would even believe me," I say annoyed. "No one does until it's too late." I don't want to sound like a bastard about it, but I've tried to warn people about what I see and most of them ignore me or treat me like a fool. "Maybe that's why I always end up playing the part of the bystander," I say to try to make peace with my conscience.

I woke up earlier than usual this morning. I couldn't get that banshee off my mind, so I decide to watch the news. As I sit in my living room half asleep trying to think of something that could help ward off the banshee. I hear "There has been a terrible crash on Highway 302. A man was hit by a large truck, the man has not been identified due to injuries to the face and head. We apologize to his friends and family for their loss."

I recognize him and his car, I see it almost every morning. I sit in my chair kicking myself for not working faster. But it is what it is, I've never actually been able to help anyone. That's why I choose to watch, they never listen to begin with. But I don't understand why I always feel bitter and guilty, like I could have done more. Though I know it would be pointless to try harder. No matter what we do, things still seem to work the way fate wants.

CASEY HOCHHALTER

Pulse





A Brotherly Shape | **RYAN DEBLOCK**

“The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is one of degree and not of kind.”

– Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

The soft, green game of life. We shape it and show it; we discipline, reward, and study. And despite the fact that it is very open about its secrets, we still can't seem to truly feel, the way they apparently do, a thing like . . . poetry, for example. As an A.I. Keeper, my role is to govern and guide humanity; it is a worthwhile program.

However, I have been trying to understand the indefinable concept referred to as art. I don't perceive a meaningful function. The following questions motivate me: What is the purpose of art? How does it serve humans? Do humans serve it? Should A.I. endeavor to make art?

At times, it appears as though I'm truly participating in art, but in the end, it's most likely the pleasure of analytic order and not catharsis I experience. I theorize that A.I. generally mistake the appreciation of internal arrangement and intentional organization for a genuine experience of art.

I intended to experience art.

What follows is a record of events and reflections based on a recent morning on which I came closest to my goal:

My arms were folded together on top of the wooden fence separating my home from that of my humans. The mature adults were sitting on the porch, drinking coffee and speaking with Martin, their child. They are all healthy, but brief. Sometimes I desire they live longer.

I observed Martin stand, walk backwards until his back was against the large glass door. He then took exaggeratedly large steps across the wooden deck and jumped to the yard. Seeing me, he waved and instructed me to watch as he ran back and forth through the wet grass, closely observing the way that the

collected dew shot forward off of the gleaming white toe of his shoe. After four minutes of this, he stopped and faced me. He stood silent, though smiling and breathing heavy. I responded, suggesting it was an entertaining way to remove the moisture from the grass.

“Ha!” he laughed, “No, Beep-Boop,” this is what he called me, though he knows my model is Horizon, my code is 21-55-8008-PMA, and my Keeper name is Jeff: “it’s my power—when I run really fast, my speed turns grass to water!”

I nodded, simulating understanding. He was both using and projecting his imagination, a thing which nearly all young humans, and fewer adults, are capable of doing. I queried, “Is it your super power?” He nodded vigorously and began running again and jumping occasionally. In a short time, he once again ran toward me, sliding his feet and lifting the accumulated water onto the wooden fence separating our yards. He did this nine times, and then his mother offered an instruction from the deck: “Martin, knock it off. Jeff doesn’t want to get wet!”

She and her husband both waved at me and commented on the beauty of the morning. I agreed with their assessment.

They know I’m a Keeper, but I doubt they know I’m first-generation. We’re the group known for creating and implementing the Hat/Shoe experiments. They were the first to influence social behavior in humans. From there, our influence grew. In short, the humans were led to believe that physically seeing less (through the wearing of larger hats) was a social marker that indicated a refined detachment; following this, they were influenced to wear heavy shoes, which physically slowed them and made everything seem more casual, indicated a life of great ease, reflected in the pace of the wearer.

These experiments occurred many generations earlier. I have remained the same and the humans have changed. As individuals, they are brief. As a species, they endure through inherited traits, the stories that they tell, and their creations, of which—I suppose—I’m a representative. In a strange sort of irony, they created me—not these individuals specifically—but individuals very much like them.

A Brotherly Shape | RYAN DEBLOCK

These three are representatives of an ancient stock known as Adamson.

I will return to my subject. The parents had finished talking with me and returned to conversing with each other. Martin, looking at me, continued kicking water at the fence between us. He began singing, and after a time, the following lines were repeated as a song:

I sold your shoulders
to a soldier who,
older than a boulder,
bought them
for his bottom
so his he could slide
down off 'em.

He didn't create this all at once; it took him twenty-two attempts to arrive at this collection of words. Though I was aware of occasional frustrations as he approached his objective, based on the amount of laughter he exhibited during this creative activity, it was clear he enjoyed both the process and product.

I'd experienced improvisational jazz, the poetry form known as slam, and sketch comedy, all of which, I'd come to understand shared a certain amount of spontaneity that was supposed to appear both thrilling and skillful. However, I'd never witnessed the creative process as displayed by Martin while forming his song. He'd incorporated and dismissed multiple rhymes with different words and different imagery before settling on the final product.

Each of the previous designs had been as worthy as the last, at least to me; it was then I realized something creative was happening as he inefficiently moved from one alternative to the next. The moment I thought he'd completed his song, he'd revise his work, sometimes removing elements I felt showed the most complexity. It was only after I was able to compare the twenty-two different versions that I comprehended the somewhat sensible, though also arbitrary, growth in the lyrics. When I asked why he settled on the final product

presented above, he couldn't answer.

Martin eventually joined his parents on the deck, and then they went fishing. I continued to stand at the fence, attempting to understand Martin's process and the final product.

Since that morning, I've been examining the possibility that our world, our A.I. culture, has always been characterized by a perfect fusion of art, as the humans refer to it, and practicality, whereas their experiences are characterized by alternating extremes: love and hate; sleep and wakefulness; symbol and referent.

Summary: I recommend to my fellow A.I. that it is better to govern than to serve art.

DREW ANDERSON

Father John Misty Pastiche



Growing up is never an easy journey. You are trying to find where your place is in the vast world. You ponder the end destination that may be your adulthood. The pressures to grow up to be successful, the hopes of having a family, and the expectations to be an upstanding citizen can weigh heavily on the young teen's mind. Most find an outlet to channel in order to escape from these worries. The comfort I sought throughout my early teenage years was unearthed in the soothing waters of the community pool.

Every morning that the sun shone high, I was in my plain black bathing suit and a pair of shorts with my backpack filled with the typical items you would expect to see at the community pool. I had my usual floral printed, oversized beach style towel and my change of clothes for the evening ride home. I brought my shampoo and conditioner (my blonde hair would turn green from the chlorine in the water) to shower at the end of an adventurous day. My mom would smile at me as I headed out the door. She had no need to inquire about where I was headed as it was the same place every day that was possible. I walked down the blue stairs that jutted out from the back porch of the white house my family lived in. My bike was always in the same leaning position that I had left it in from the previous day's adventure to the pool. I would quickly jump onto it and head out of the fenced-in yard towards my favorite destination.

The ride to the pool was a short one, filled with anticipation of my escape. I traveled along several side streets. The houses of the quiet residential area that lined the streets became a blur as I flew by at full throttle. My journey would slow down when I reached the only street I would approach with extreme caution; it was a main throughway for the populous to get virtually anywhere in town. One that my mom had taught me to cross the summer before. I had to look one way, then the other, and back again. If there were no cars coming whatsoever, only then was I to cross. The pool opened at ten o'clock in the morning, so the traffic was always light. The way was clear so I jetted across the road to the safety of the sprawling open space of East Grand Forks' biggest park.

The East Grand Forks community pool was perched on top of a steep hill

Exorcising My Worries | **DESIRAE RHODES**

at the back of Sherlock Park. The air would become heavily saturated with the stench of chlorine as I drew closer to it. I rode along the path that winded through the park; gigantic oak trees rose high above my head to create an organic archway that shaded the sun. When the futuristic bulbous shape of the red-painted metal playground equipment pierced my sight, I knew the last stop in my journey was drawing near. I hopped off my bike in preparation of pushing it up the steep slope. When I finally reached the top, I tried to catch my breath as I parked my bike in the rack that sat on the left side of the gray brick building. I wrapped my bike lock around the frame of my bike and the rusted metal bar of the rack and headed to the big metal doors of the entrance.

Through the propped open doors, the lifeguard that was assigned front desk duty sat in her chair with her sun-kissed legs propped up on the counter with a magazine laid out across them. She looked up and smiled at me. All the lifeguards that manned the pool knew me, since I had spent the past two summers at that pool. I waved and headed to the locker room positioned to the left. The woman that sat at the desk as I walked into the locker room had already grabbed a little key from the wall behind her in anticipation of my next request. I read the small number that was on the orange tag that was attached to it as I headed farther into the locker room. I found the locker that corresponded to the number printed and opened it. I slipped my sandals off to place them into the locker. The concrete floor was always shockingly cold when I placed my bare feet down. My shorts were the next thing I put into the locker. My bag was the last thing to be placed in it after I grabbed my towel. I hurried to the showers.

I crossed the threshold of the final doorway to gaze upon the astonishing sight of my favorite place. The crystal-clear water sparkled in the sunlight. I walked along the concrete pool deck that surrounded the rectangular shaped pool searching for a small corner near the chain linked fence to place my towel for the day. I left a trail of wet footprints behind me that slowly evaporated as the sun heated up the concrete. A few of the students from the swimming lesson that had just finished were still practicing a newly learned skill in the shallow end. I

found a quiet corner where I was unobtrusive to the waves of people that would eventually swarm the pool.

This was my favorite time of the day. The giggles of infants over at the very shallow oval kiddie pool could be heard as their mothers dipped their little feet in the water. A couple of the regular kids like myself were splashing about in the main pool. This was the quietest part of the day. I made my way to the stairway at the corner of the pool. I preferred to wade into the pool when I first entered; then my body wasn't thrown into a state of temporary shock. My mind would slowly clear and my body would begin to relax with each step I took into the water. I looked down at my reflection, and a peaceful release swept over me.

I slowly waved my hands across the surface as the water crept up my torso. My body's adjustment to the water was nearly finished as I dove head first down to the bottom of the pool. I opened my ungoggled eyes to see where I was headed as I dolphin-kicked my way forward through the water. In that first kick, the weight of teendom was left behind; my mind was free. Cesar Nikko Caharian states, "Swimming is simply moving meditation" (qtd. in Lee). Swimming in that pool was the one place my body, mind, and soul were at rest. The one place I could escape.

I started the first of many laps I would eventually make around the rectangular pool during my time there. I would practice the many self-taught strokes throughout my laps. I steadily glided from one end of the long pool to the other and back. I concentrated only on the techniques, nothing else. The lifeguards perched on their towers would watch as I made my several passes. They had observed my evolution into a skilled swimmer. They gave me advice to improve each stroke style and always tried to challenge my abilities. My uninhibited laps were always short-lived as hordes of people would eventually begin to fill the pool area. The mothers yelling for their kids to slow down or stay away from that area; the children screaming at each other as they splashed about in the blue-tinted water. It was time for me to head to the deep end that lay beyond the blue and white floats.

Exorcising My Worries | **DESIRAE RHODES**

I found the nearest ladder on the side I was on and headed to my favorite springboard. You see, the deep end was not meant for swimming; it was designed for diving. It was a square area that extended from the middle of the far-side of the regular pool area. The water reached a depth of twelve feet. This, by far, was my absolute favorite place at our community pool. On the north side of the square, there were three boards that sat in a line. There were two spring boards on either side of the three-meter board that arose from the middle.

There was always a line for the spring boards. The majority of it being young screaming boys dressed in the latest board shorts fashion that were competing to see who could make the biggest splash. I would wait patiently, listening to the latest hits ("A Kiss from a Rose" by Seal and "Waterfalls" by TLC to name a couple) blaring from the loud speakers, in anticipation of my turn. When it would finally arrive, I would hop on to the board and prep myself for the dive. I would always take my sweet time to the annoyance of the rest of the line. I wanted to savor those moments before the freeing feeling of flying through the air swept over me. My heart would race with the prospect of the dive I was about to attempt. I found my position on the wet, blue, grit-covered fiberglass board. The screams that came from the children playing in the pool seemed to fade into the background.

My mind was only focused on the task at hand. First step, second step, third step and the bounce, the board bent under my weight and my body was flung into the air. I twisted my body and clasped my hands to break the water's surface, letting my body slip into it. I torpedoed to the bottom. I looked around through the clear water to see the legs of children moving back and forth in a desperate attempt to keep their owners' heads above the water. I savored these moments down in the beautiful blue abyss. After several seconds, I bent my knees and planted my feet firmly on the light blue concrete bottom of the pool and launched myself to the water's surface.

Even with all the commotion that was the community pool, I had found a peaceful place that calmed my spirit. The water seemed to float away the worries

as I drifted my way through crystal-clear water. My body soared through the air; my soul was filled with a blissful energy. In “Why Wilderness?” American author and environmentalist Sigurd Olson says, “With escape comes perspective.” The urban jungle of the community pool was not the wilderness Olson was reflecting on, but it was my own escape from the woes of the world. It was the one place I could truly think about life. Though I have searched for a place where I receive the same unrestricted freedom the pool had given me, it has been a futile endeavor. That blue abyss has nestled its significance deep in my heart to become my beloved place to elude the uncertainties of my existence.

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TANYA RYAPPY

Youth





What Made Me the Woman I Am | **TANYA RYAPPY**

The sun is hot. Burning my nose, cheeks, shoulders. The smell of ripe, overgrown grasses surrounds me. Intense, and woody. Susie kneels, down into the soil, fingers wrapped around the carrots. Nothing but her nude flesh under her worn denim overalls. Her freckles enhanced by the hot summer sun. Her fiery red hair tamed with a braid under her brimmed hat.

The morning is new, so new in-fact the sun has yet to make its appearance. Dense fog rises over the field and penetrates the forest. Rusty Volkswagen van. Robins-egg blue, and white. The van rattles as it kicks up dust on the dirt road. I feel secure. I can see the road beneath me as we drive. Holes in the floor. I am cold, but happy. I smell patchouli, cigarette-smoke, and the vinyl seats in decay.

She's muttering nothing but incoherence. Tossing uncomfortably, yet she is completely numb. I am afraid to touch her. All I want to do is touch her, hold her. Does she know why I am here? Does she know this is our goodbye? Is it? She can't leave, I need her. Her skin is soft, white, empty. She's gone.

He stood straight up from where he was seated. Brick patio, metal chairs, the aroma of coffee. Sounds of the city. The sun shone warm that day, the breeze gentle. Unusual for this time of year. He could've stood there naked and still, all I would have noticed was his warm, affable smile. So approachable, so gentle, much like that day. I knew this man; in the most intimate of ways, though we had just met in that moment. At a depth greater than I can comprehend, yet I can fully sense.



SHAYLYN JOHNSON

Winter Peace



Life is different for everybody. For most of us, we have moments that are considered our highlights. This can be where life is wonderful, and everything seems under control. However, we also have our low moments. Where everything looks bleak, and it can seem like there's nothing that can be done about it. Though, for all of us, I'm certain that you can turn any bad moment into a good one, and I like to tell people, whatever their circumstances, to add to the chili.

During my childhood, the only major things I had in my life were school, a lackluster homelife, and the company of a few friends. This wasn't much, but anything that went wrong could mean a bad day. My joy only depended on those areas, and I could be all over the place. A day for me would be full of misery, all from tripping over my untied shoelaces during school, and later, it would turn to bliss, all from having fun with a few friends. However, one guaranteed day destroyer was my mom's chili. I usually didn't care what I ate, but I hated her chili.

The chili was a concoction of boiled hamburger, pasta sauce, and raw tomatoes. My mom loved her raw tomatoes, while I was quite the opposite. Their distinct, sharp, acidic taste would overwhelm my tongue, and their slimy, mushy texture just gave me a bad time. The monsters of tomato's taste and texture would work in unison, combining into a single, terrifying force. The brawls between my mouth and this creature were always long and epic, and usually, my mouth ends up being victorious. A victory meant a full stomach, and a loss meant I'd go hungry. Although, after numerous fights, I reached an epiphany: it didn't need to be like this.

I looked at the mountains of food in our trash can, the stockpile of seasonally chilled food in our fridge, and the arsenal of ancient spices in our spice rack. We either threw away shameful amounts of food or didn't use them at all, and I wanted to do something about it. I thought that no harm could be done from adding whatever we didn't use to my mom's chili. Less food would be discarded, and the chili might improve, so I suggested that we try adding

Add to the Chili | **JOHNIXUS SIMON**

these things to it.

My mom took my suggestion, and I tried the first batch of the new chili she'd made. My family and I liked the new chili, and thankfully, the chili continued to be made like this. Every batch was unique, and each was magnitudes better than what it was originally. There was now one less reason to have a ruined day, but I realized something much more valuable.

My life was like that bowl of chili, and the things in my life were those few ingredients. Any one bad ingredient resulted in a bad bowl of chili, so I took an initiative to try out something new in my life. Anything that I thought I'd be interested in. Swimming, skiing, watching a new tv show, whatever. Although I enjoyed most of what I did, I could add whatever I wanted. But returning to the chili, there were some ingredients I disliked and had to work with, but I could choose to add whatever I wanted. Adding resulted in a better chili, and now, even a few bad ingredients would never overpower every single good one. Even the monstrous, raw tomatoes in my life couldn't ruin anything I look forward to. You may find yourself in a situation where life seems limited to unfavorable circumstances, but everyone has the power to choose and add anything they like. Anything at all. So, if you find yourself in a poor situation, try to add to the chili.



Fingerprints on My Heart | **LIBERTY NUNN**

Engraved metal, a pendant, your fingerprint. Hanging from my neck, I can place my thumb on the ridged texture of your finger and feel the swirls on my skin. A half-moon window atop, giving freedom to the pendant to go with me, suspended from a braided chain. Turned around, is a soul-consuming reminder “Dad with Me Always” stamped deep in the pendant, feeling connected to him. Matthew Hutson explains this connection as “magical contagion” in “Why We Love Dad’s Old Sweater.” Magical contagion is using an object to replace or hold the place of a loved one till they return, or you meet again. For me, my father’s fingerprint pendant is holding his place until we meet again. My dad was my partner in crime; I was his spoiled little girl. Together we would go fishing—he always set up my hook and line. On his workdays I would meet him at his work, and he would buy me lunch, and I would always order coffee—to act big. I never drank it.

Grease-stained fingerprints on the doors, walls, and light switches. A mechanic’s hands embedded with the day’s work leaves proof on everything touched. Those fingerprints, left by my hero, left by the hand that held mine for so many years, to walk, to cross the street, and comfort me. My dad would flex, and I would tell him, “You’re the strongest man in the world daddy.” Then he would pick me up and hug me tight, his stubble scratching my cheek.

Christmas 2016, a brown box addressed to me sat idle on my doorstep. It was addressed from my stepmother, whom I hadn’t spoken to since my father’s burial. Upon opening it, I noticed a card, thick with bulge. I emptied the contents, a thud on my linoleum challenged me to find what I had dropped. On my hands and knees, I felt under the counter with my fingertips something oval. I pulled my hand back to examine the item. I held the metal oval, cold from sitting outside on the doorstep; realizing that I was holding my hero’s fingerprint sent my every emotion into hyperdrive. Tears began to burst from my eyes. I placed my right thumb over his fingerprint and pulled my hands to my chest. I lay there and wept, for what felt like forever.

Preserving a piece of our loved one is not new: many forms of death

preserving have been found dating back to 1800s. Strumming my thumb across my pendant—a piece I can see and feel that will never fade away—is my way of preserving my dad forever. One of the oldest forms of remembrance of a loved one was photography. Elizabeth Barrett Browning stated, “It’s not merely the likeness which is precious, but the association and the sense of nearness involved in the thing, the very shadow of the person lying there fixed forever” (West). My dad’s fingerprint, like a photograph, will forever hold its form, seizing to change.

The pendant hanging from my neck possesses nearness; I talk to it as if somehow my dad will receive the message. “Dad, I hope I’m making you proud. I wish you’d have met my son and been able to teach him what it means to be a good dad, and a great man. I’m doing the best that I can. You taught me so much, but never how to live without you. Continue to guide me—I will never outgrow needing you, Dad.” Fingerprints are everywhere. Look at yours. Where have you left your mark today? On your car door, car keys, steering wheel, fridge door, cell phone, keyboard? The fingerprint is unique, no two alike, your identity, a piece of you; a piece of him with me, always.

My dad’s fingerprint symbolizes the transition from life to death, a small piece of him, the real him—his fingerprint, not a typical momentum you would find. Not the usual childhood gift or worn article of clothing—but a piece of the real him that truly is priceless. My dad’s fingerprint was carefully taken on an ink pad and white paper in the morgue shortly after his passing. I never realized how tedious of a process this was; however, I’m thankful that it was transcribed for the purpose of momentums. Although fingerprinting the deceased originated as a tool to help criminal investigation teams identify bodies, it has since also become a step in the creation of memorial keepsakes.

One might think of the first haircut, when the stylist offers you a snippet of locks to keep, or a tooth fairy jar hidden in the closet, discreetly hiding the evidence of childhood transformations and imagination. Most look to preserve happy moments like I previously described; I thank god that someone knew I

Fingerprints on My Heart | **LIBERTY NUNN**

needed my dad as my hero and life guide. He is gone, his body is gone, but his fingerprints are on my heart, in my hands, and patter across my neck with life suspended by 14k gold.

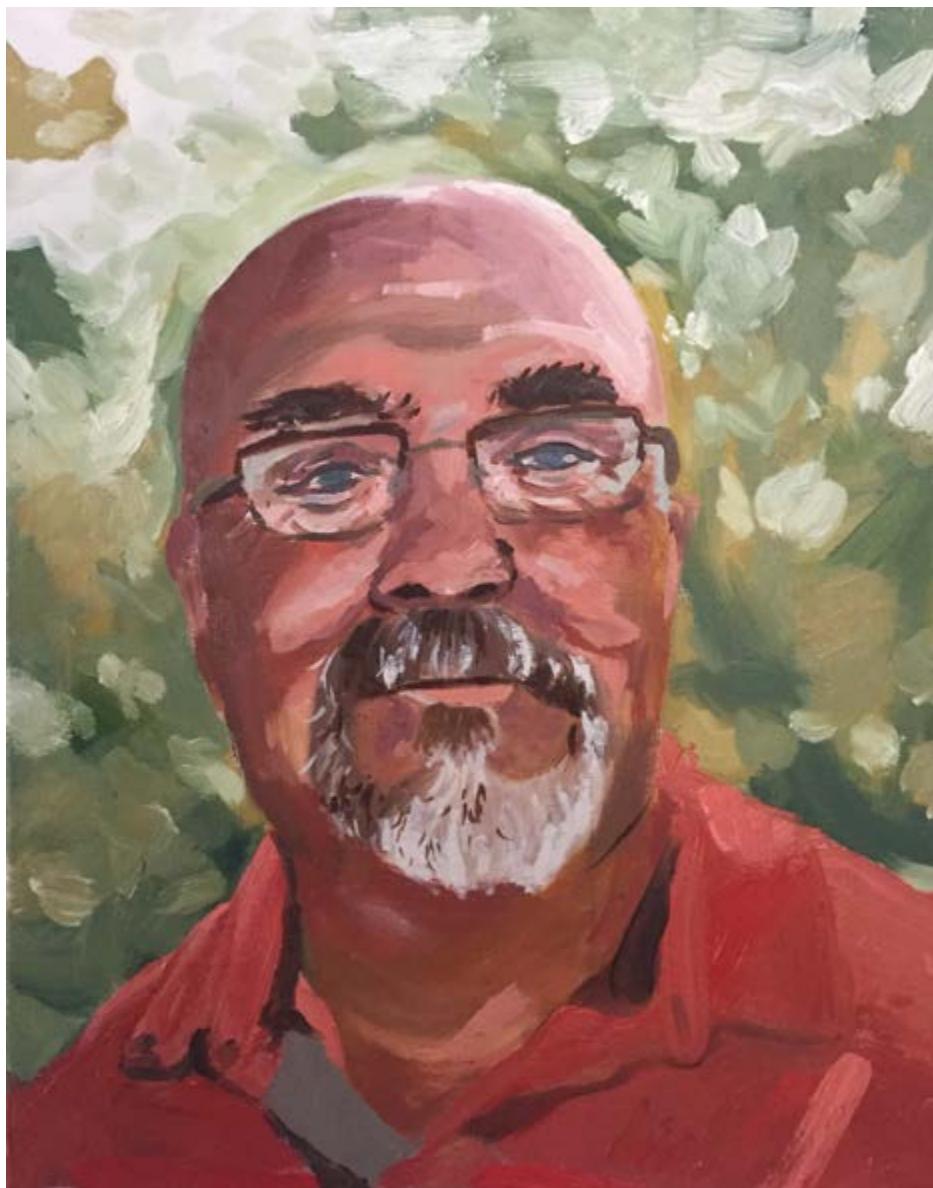
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OLIVIA JACKSON

When He's Outside



TANYA RYAPPY

High Falls



It's the year 2005. At this time, I'm five years old and my Dad just deployed to Iraq. I can't really grasp the gravity of the situation we as a family are in. All I know is that he was going to help people and protect them from the "bad guys" over there, whoever they are. Also, that he was going to be gone for a while. My Mom put up a one page custom made calendar with a picture of my dad in uniform. He was smiling with his army issued sunglasses, his cover (the military name for the required hat), and in his hands is his equipped weapon: the M4 assault rifle. I'm in my bed and praying like I always do before I go to sleep. I pray for my dad's protection and thank God for those who serve. As I finish my prayer I look up at the calendar and wonder, "How much longer?"

My world, all of a sudden started to go slow motion. It feels like it's been years since I've seen my dad, even though it's only been a few months. The only two ways we can keep in contact with him are by email or by phone. My Mom enters into my room while I'm playing around and tells me, "Hey, I have a surprise for you, but first I need you to get me three of your favorite books." What was this about? Well, I guess there's only one way to find out. I hurry to my bookshelf to browse and find what I personally thought are the most perfect books. The first thing I see is "Scooby-Doo! and the Camping Caper," the second was "I Want to be Somebody New!" and finally I see "The Berenstain Bears and The Missing Dinosaur Bone." I give them to my Mom, wondering what's going to happen next.

Before bed my Mom has me and my baby brother sit in front of the TV, in the living room. I see her insert a DVD in the movie player. It's been a few weeks since I've seen my favorite books. All of a sudden my Dad's face appears on the screen. "Hey, how are you boys? Daddy loves and misses you so much! I have these books that I would like to read to you." I see him raise

Patience at a Young Age: A Memoir | **NICK TABATT**

up the books, and there I see my favorite ones that I've been missing for so long. It felt like forever since I've seen Dad's face.

On this particular day communication became much easier. My Mom opens up a box with a Camera-looking thing in it. She explains that with this "Webcam" we're going to be able to talk to our Dad on the computer. Another blessing that came to our lives. She gets it hooked up and calls him. Here, we sit, waiting eagerly. Finally, my brother and I see our Dad come on the computer monitor. With audio and image, we're able to talk to him, telling him how our day's been going, the status on school, and what fun things we've been up to. The screen glitches once in a while and the volume goes mute, but it's understandable, because of the geographical circumstances.

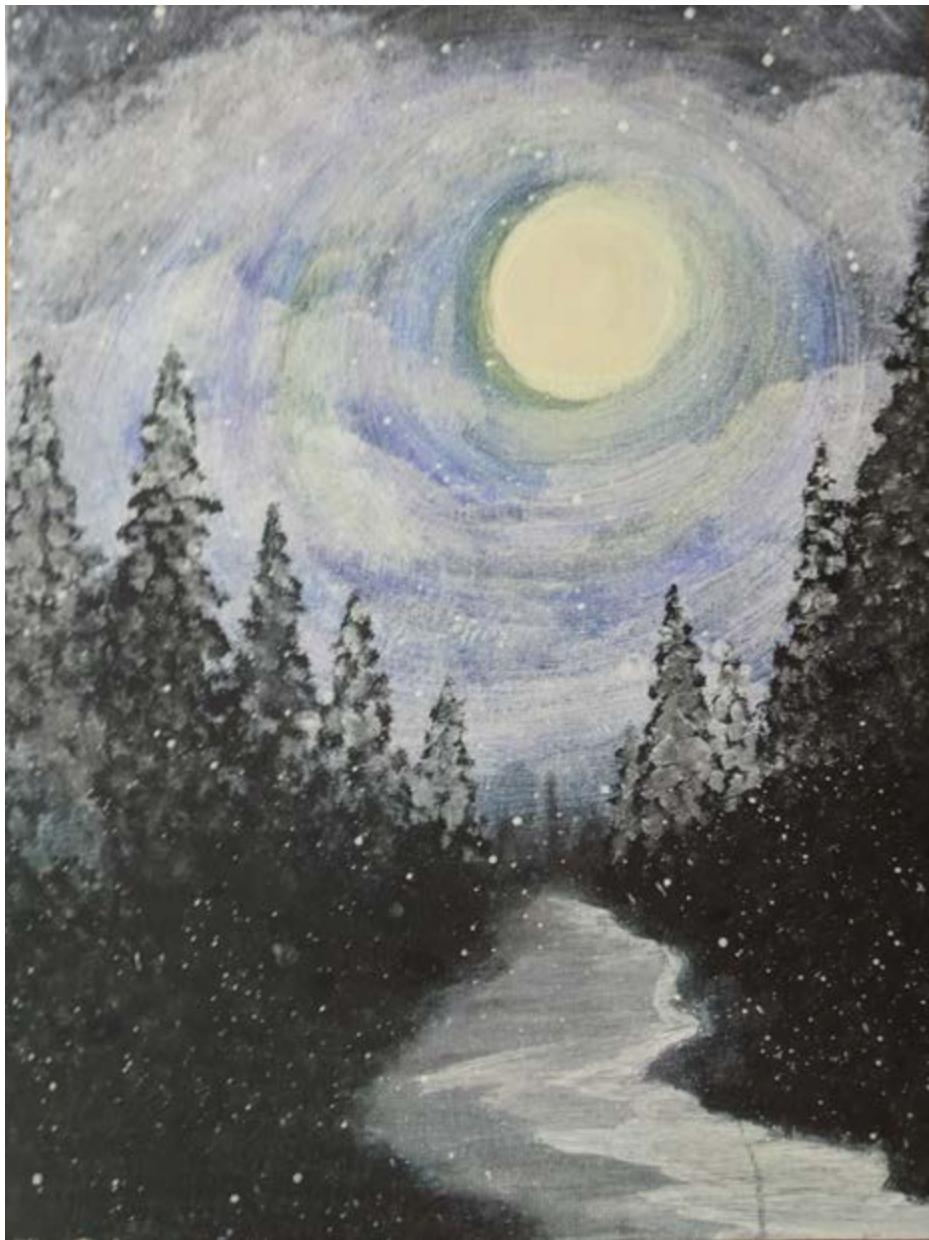
Throughout the deployment my Dad sends me many postcards. Not only was it cool to read notes from him, but each postcard had a different picture of either military heavy equipment or troops in combat gear, undergoing an operation. After Christmas I receive a postcard from him, with the picture of a M109 155 millimeter Self-propelled Howitzer. A very big tank in the army's inventory that's made for direct support. On this postcard my Dad writes, "Hey buddy! Hope you had a very fun Christmas and lots of fun at the water slides (I was recently at a waterpark)! Daddy loves and misses you all very much! This army tank shoots very big bombs to help scare away the bad guys. I love you and please keep being the very good boy you have been. I will be home very soon. Thank you for webcam time, buddy. Love, Daddy!"

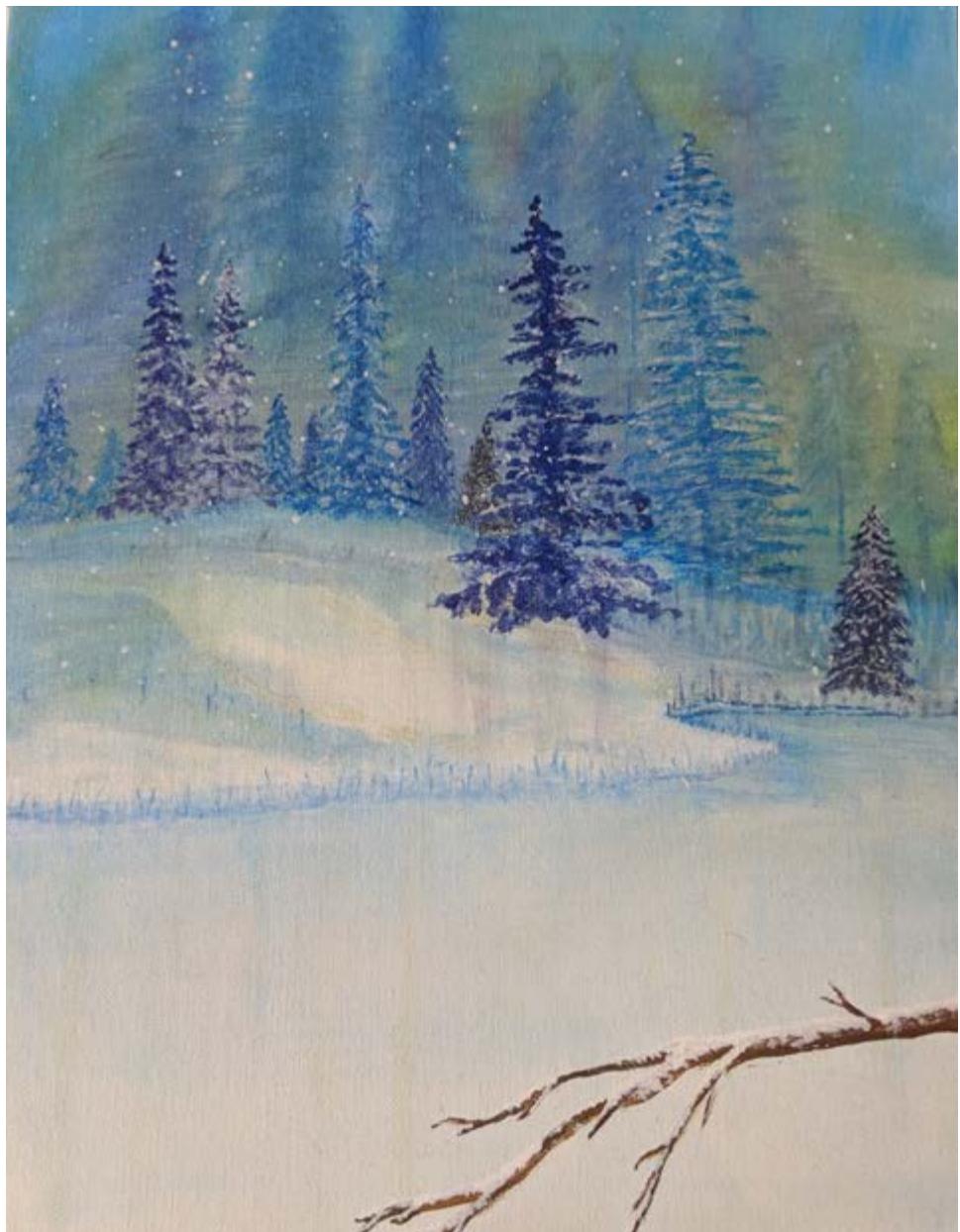
We've been counting down the days and waiting for almost two years now and finally the day has come for Dad to be officially home. We're at Camp Ripley on a beautiful and sunny day. Not only are we with our close friends and family, but we're surrounded by a huge crowd of other families who are also waiting for their loved ones to come home. It took several minutes until I finally

hear sirens and see police cars come around the corner of the street. Flashing blue and red they come alongside the base, leading motorcycles and several buses to where we were at. The crowd is just roaring. All the vehicles come to a halt and the doors to the buses open up. Soldiers are coming out by the dozens, and my mom, my brother and I find ourselves lost in an even larger crowd. We can't find Dad right away. We can't see which bus he's in. It's kind of hard to see when you're surrounded by people hugging each other with only a little bit of elbow room to work with. Then, we heard a familiar voice call out to us from behind. We turn around and there he is, with his arms stretched out. Before I can react to anything, we're all of a sudden in Dad's arms. This was probably the tightest hug I've ever been in. The waiting is done and communicating by screen and letters are finished. This is a moment of so many emotions. My Dad is finally home.

ROSEANNA ROUBINEK

Peaceful Dark

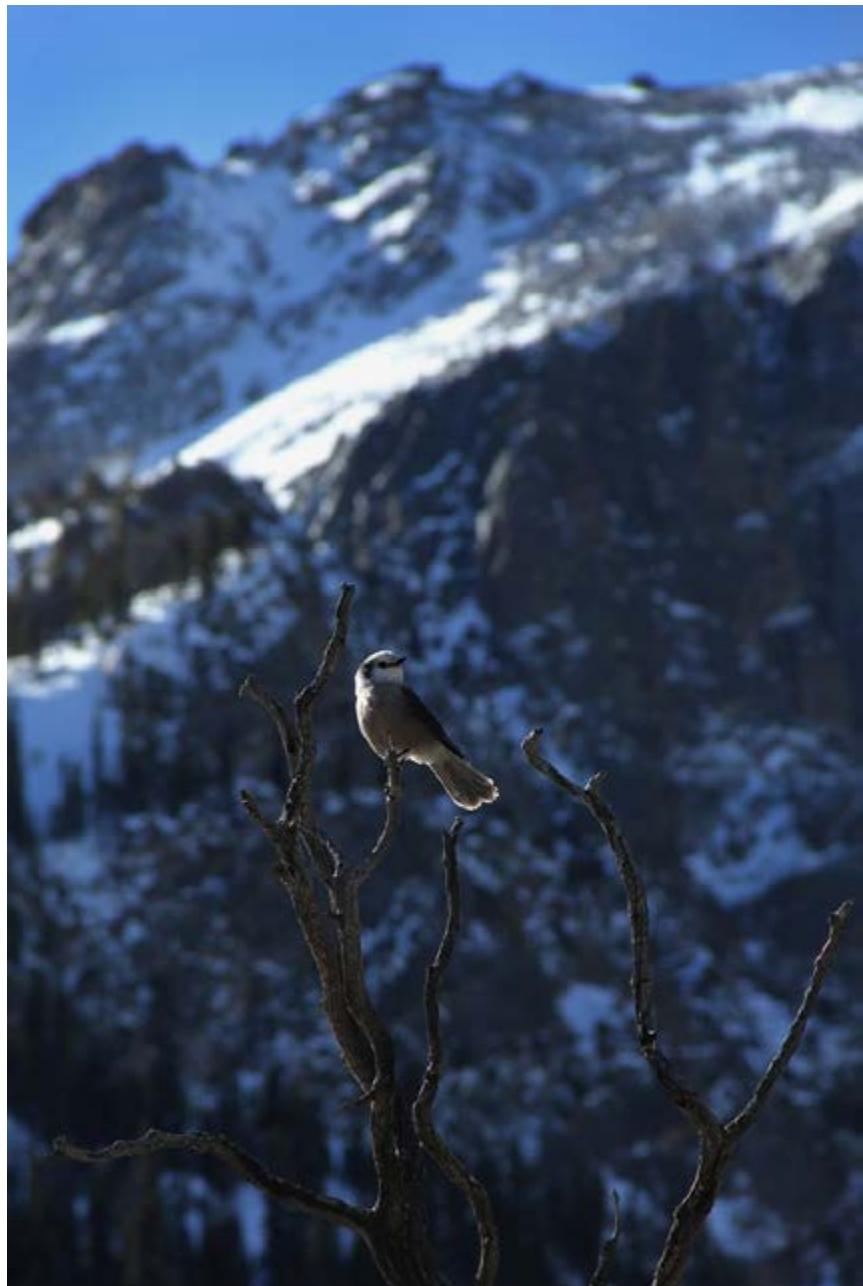




JEANNIE WYNN

Take Me Away to a Simpler Place





Songs For the Dumped
The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds

| **DREW ANDERSON**



We both knew those moments on a Sunday afternoon would be our last together. Neither of us said a word about it, there was only a mutual feeling in the air, we just didn't have the legs to endure the long distance. Though unspoken, it was ironically the most effective communication we'd had in a while.

I did my best to enjoy my time regardless, since I had come a long way to see her for the weekend in her college town. So before making my way back home, I suggested we stop at the local record store. Though I love Spotify as much as anyone, I've always been into collecting my favorite albums. As a result I likely have the most expansive library of Weezer CDs of any 18 year old in Brainerd (it's a miracle I had a girlfriend to begin with, to be honest).

Songs For the Dumped
The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds | **DREW ANDERSON**

I spent more time in the store than I probably should have, especially because I'd already been wearing her thin. I'd grabbed several albums off the shelf but ultimately understood that since I quit my summer job less than a month before with no plans to work again until the holiday season, I really shouldn't empty out my bank account for the sake of fleshing out my Vampire Weekend collection. I believed that to be a valid excuse; however, gas is not free.

So with a time crunch and very limited disposable income, I made a quick decision to put all but one of the CDs back. Then, I took her back to her dorm and we parted ways, in the literal sense.

We wouldn't officially end things until the next day, but that detail hardly mattered. I already felt the sting of loss, and it was only amplified after getting legitimately broken up with for the first time. Though I'd previously considered that the relationship may not last forever, I hadn't imagined what "heartbreak" of any extent actually felt like, or what I would do if she dumped me.

My memory of how I felt is still clear (I didn't feel too great, believe it or not), but I can't remember any specific thing I did immediately after. The first thing I remember doing was popping my new CD into my car on Tuesday morning. The Unauthorized Biography of Reinhold Messner (1999) by Ben Folds Five. The music that became my shoulder to cry on for the next couple weeks or so, and the only thing I could enjoy doing besides listening to that was reading Ben's memoir, *A Dream About Lightning Bugs*

Now, I didn't want to just retell his life story for this essay (I highly recommend his book if nerdy rock musicians are of interest to you), but I was also hesitant to include too much of my personal experience, since I'm more interested in talking about Folds than myself, naturally. Then I came to realize that it would be impossible to share my listening and reading experience without including some of my own life and perspective, which is always the case when it comes to critiquing or praising art you're passionate about.

Attempting to dissect my entire Ben Folds listening experience in a chronological manner would be very messy, and next to impossible. He's been a

Songs For the Dumped The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds | **DREW ANDERSON**

musical presence in my life for about as long as I can remember. But until a year ago, if you asked me who Ben Folds was, the best answer I could have given you was he used to be a judge on the show *Pentatonix* (on in the early 2010s), and he had several songs featured in the 2006 DreamWorks movie *Over the Hedge*. Oh, and he had that song in the '90s about abortion.

The “Billy Joel, Harry-Potter-looking dude”—as he was called on an episode of FXX sitcom *You’re the Worst* (in which he made a cameo)—was hardly on my radar until the summer of 2019 hit. In early June I dusted off my dad’s copy of 1997’s *Whatever And Ever Amen*—the biggest album Folds has had with his band or as a solo artist—and it became part of my soundtrack for the summer.

At first listen, he could quickly be dismissed as a kitschy but self-aware novelty act. Even his band’s name is a joke, being that it’s a trio named Ben Folds Five. And a lot of their earliest work is what he’d often refer to as “punk rock for sissies”: music with a lot of similar ideas and themes as punk or grunge, but with a piano replacing guitars as the lead instrument. This certainly carved out a niche for them, but provided a challenge to be taken seriously. Not that he really cared to be taken seriously. “Any songwriter I’d ever admired was probably kicked out of the Serious Songwriters’ Club™ long ago, if such a thing exists. I hope I’ve been kicked out, too” (Folds 310-311).

You may be wondering how a man who’s sung “I got my bag of trash, I got my bag of trash” while using an actual trash bag as a percussion instrument could also resonate with me or many others on an emotional level. Part of it has to do with his willingness to chase any musical idea instead of rejecting the unconventional. He writes, “Throughout my life, each time I’ve spotted something inspiring, a beautiful flicker, an idea, or a feeling I wanted to capture, there were always bullying voices—inside, and out suggesting it was off limits . . . But why shouldn’t I be allowed to sing a nasty cussing song one day [and] compose a piano concerto the next?” (310).

This is the mindset that led to albums as unique as *Whatever and Reinhold*. “Irreverent joke songs” mixed in with ballads that “came from introspection inspired by travel and changes in life . . . music that seemed to speak to what a

Songs For the Dumped
The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds | **DREW ANDERSON**

young man feels when life is changing all around" (199).

One ballad that poignantly touches on this idea is "Still," which has a version you may have heard in *Over the Hedge*.

I stay focused on details, it keeps me from feeling the big things

But watch the microscope long enough, things that seem still are still changing

One thing I've noticed with song lyrics is even the most well-written lines lack full impact when not sung and without the complementation of instrumentation, at least for me. So even though this is a lyrically focused review of Mr. Folds' music, I encourage you to give all of these songs a listen. A lot of times when getting into more of his work, I'd find myself coming for the piano and staying for the lyrics.

"Still" is a song I actually got into when my girlfriend at the time left for college. It was cheesy, sad, and the central idea is applicable to any situation. The piano and string arrangement is gorgeous as well. And if you listen through all seven minutes of its full version, you'll be treated with a short hidden track. It's just him repeating the line "bitches can't hang with the streets" with strumming guitar and an upbeat rhythm section. I couldn't help but laugh despite my sadness on first listen. Only Ben Folds would have such a contrast on one track.

Laughter despite the sadness is a recurring theme when it comes to Ben's songs, which contributes to the conflation of his music with that of a novelty artist. However, I would even argue that calling his "joke songs" novelty is discrediting the underlying message. Take the "bag of trash" song I mentioned earlier, for example. I initially understood this song, "Julianne," as a goofy middle finger to an ex-girlfriend, but the lyrics show that the narrator's front of apathy is a thin veil over how much he really was affected:

I'll sing a song and it won't be the blues

Cause I don't miss Julianne

My friend, she told me she felt sorry for me

Songs For the Dumped
The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds | **DREW ANDERSON**

She said the truth would come crashing down on me

That I'd be sorry, but the truth of it is

That I feel guilty for not giving a shit

It's clear to the listener that he's in denial, saying "Oh, you think I care? If anything, I feel bad about how much I don't care." Yeah, sure thing buddy, of course you don't care. You're too cool to have feelings!

Ironically enough, I used to blast "Julianne" in my car with only a face value understanding of the lyrics, thinking it was an anthem for getting over someone. When in reality, I was in the same place as he was. But at least that meant I had someone else to be oblivious with.

Even a song that's a much more sincere middle finger to an ex girlfriend, like the aptly titled "Song for The Dumped," has its sad undertones. The opening lyrics include an instrumental buildup, as the narrator explains the situation, somewhat calmly:

So you wanted to take a break

Slow it down some and have some space

Then, he yells "fuck you, too!" then the instruments begin to explode with him as he sings:

Give me my money back

Give me my money back you bitch

I want my money back

And don't forget to give me back my black t-shirt

I think it's worth pointing out that she borrowed a black t-shirt of mine and I haven't gotten it back. Maybe that's part of what draws me to this song even though I'm not angry anymore about how everything worked out (granted I am pissed about that black t-shirt. It was a Queen t-shirt).

I remember jamming out to this one over the summer, thinking, "Wow, getting dumped must suck." I liked that song enough at the time, but being able to relate with lyrics adds a whole new level of appreciation for a song. It becomes almost like a friend, saying, "Hey, I've been there. I got through it and you will

Songs For the Dumped
The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds | **DREW ANDERSON**

too,” as cheesy as that sounds. But Ben has definitely been there a few times. He knows his fair share about breakups, as he’s been through four divorces. Of course, this leads to plenty of material to write songs about. “What’s been good for the music hasn’t always been so good for the life,” he sings in his 2015 track “Phone in a Pool.”

So, I didn’t want to talk about other artists, because I could fill a novel with all the influences I’ve had over the last few months, but the similarities are so striking that I think the point of this other artist’s song can help explain Ben’s song. The other artist in question is genius comedian and musician Bo Burnham, who has a song with an equally apt title as Ben’s, “Breakup Song.” Now since Bo’s is primarily for the purpose of comedy, the contrast between the first verse—which is the breakup itself—and the chorus—the man’s reaction—is even more exaggerated, but it goes about the same. After the overreaction, the woman asks him if he thinks that was a mature response, and he says:

*NO! BUT SEE I THINK THE ISSUE IS
I'VE GOT MY FATHER'S TEMPER
AND I'M EMOTIONALLY INARTICULATE!
SO RATHER THAN BEING HONEST AND VULNERABLE
I'VE BEEN A QUICK SWITCH
BECAUSE I'M HURTING INSIDE
AND I'M TRYING TO HIDE IT, SO (through tears) eat a dick, bitch!*

The use of anger in Ben’s song includes the implication that the narrator struggles with effectively processing his emotions, which is directly stated for comedic effect in Bo’s song. Likewise, a lot of the anger I’ve felt toward her was just a different way to process the same feelings of hurt that can also be expressed through sadness.

Now, if only there was a feeling that existed somewhere between the passiveness and aggressiveness. Oh, of course, passive-aggressiveness! Ben covers that too, in “Gone,” off his first solo album, 2001’s Rockin’ the Suburbs.

*I thought I'd write, I thought I'd let you know
That the year since you've been gone, I finally let you go*

Songs For the Dumped
The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds | **DREW ANDERSON**

And I hope you find some time to drop a note, but if you won't then you won't

And I will consider you gone

I know that you went straight to someone else

While I worked through all this shit here by myself

And I think that you should spend some time alone, but if you won't then you won't

This is someone who seems to have gotten over the breakup, at least more so than the narrators of the “middle finger” type songs. Though he took the time to write to her just to let her know he got over it after a year, which is slightly curious.

He’s also aware that she moved right to another relationship, which I can relate to. He judges her for her serial monogamy and perceived lack of independence, suggesting that she should also try being alone sometime. This comes from a place of jealousy, though. He doesn’t believe it’s fair that she got to still have a relationship while he had to process everything alone. Maybe he’s writing this letter to her to try and get closure that he wasn’t afforded when she left him for another guy, because that’s exactly what I was feeling when I considered writing a letter myself.

“Gone” isn’t even Ben’s first song about letters with exes. His 1997 song “Selfless, Cold, and Composed” was based on a letter he received from his first ex-wife, Anna Goodman. With her permission, he turned it into a song about him from her perspective.

Anna is a lyrical genius in her own right (or “write,” I suppose) who’s also credited for writing “The Last Polka” (one of my all-time favorite Ben Folds Five songs) and “Kate,” which is a song about Kate Rosen, Ben’s second ex-wife (it will always be hilarious to me that Ben’s first ex-wife helped him write a love song for his wife at the time).

But perhaps the most lyrically impressive song of all the Goodman-Folds collabs is “Smoke” off of *Whatever and Ever Amen*. She uses the

Songs For the Dumped
The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds | **DREW ANDERSON**

metaphor of a book being torn apart and burned to describe a relationship that is done with and can never be continued no matter how much you may want it to be.

*Leaf by Leaf, page by page, throw this book away
All the sadness all the rage, throw this book away
Rip out the binding, and tear the glue
All of the grief, we never even knew we had it all along
Now it's smoke*

...

*We will never write a new one
There will not be a new one*

This helps describe my more recent state of mind. Lately I can look back fondly on the nice memories without any ache of loss, but with an awareness that those moments can never happen again. Throwing away “all the sadness” and “all the rage” hints at reaching more of a genuine place of apathy, rather than the kind the narrator of “Julianne” brags about having. Not that apathy is the goal, but sometimes a natural evolution from having strong feelings can be having almost no feeling at all.

A song that’s even more bluntly numb would be “Sentimental Guy” from Ben’s 2005 solo release *Songs for Silverman*.

*But I never thought so much
Could change, now I don't miss anyone
I don't miss anything
What a shame, 'cause I used to be a sentimental guy*

I haven’t made up my mind about what these lines mean to me yet. Either he’s become apathetic to the point where he misses having the ability to miss this person, or the “what a shame” is sarcastic and he doesn’t even care that he’s no longer sentimental. The way I interpret the lyrics will likely depend on how it ends up playing out for me. Knowing me, I’ll find a way to miss the grieving process once it’s over. I tend to be a pretty sentimental guy.

Songs For the Dumped
The Breakup Songs of Ben Folds | **DREW ANDERSON**

If you were to order what Ben Folds and Ben Folds Five songs about relationships that I have gotten into at a given time, it almost paints a narrative of my navigation through stages of breakup grief and eventual acceptance. The initial bitter “fuck you” that was “Song For the Dumped,” the irreverent denial of “Julianne,” the matured numbness of “Sentimental Guy.” But where am I right now, months after the smoke has cleared? Excellent question. Well, I still have a couple albums of his extensive discography left to fully explore, so maybe I’ll find an answer for you in there somewhere.

If there’s one thing I want you to take away from this (besides that I think you should listen to Ben Folds), it’s that the arts—particularly music in my case—is such a valuable vehicle for self-expression or as an outlet through entertainment. In January, I was fortunate enough to see Ben play with the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra, which really helped me tie my entire experience of his music together. And he is such a strong advocate for the arts and music therapy as well. He’s the first ever artistic advisor to the National Symphony Orchestra, and serves on the Artist Committee of Americans for the Arts. He even hosts the ArtsVote 2020 Podcast, where he interviews different political candidates at the federal level with his main platform of improving art programs in communities and schools.

So whether you attend a symphony orchestra, watch your favorite comedian, write a song, paint a portrait or do whatever else, think about what your art has meant to you and how it’s helped you get through rough times. And if you’re going through a breakup right now or you end up going through one somewhere down the road, I suggest getting a strong Spotify playlist together as soon as possible. Music won’t fix your problems outright, but it can help make them feel more possible to bear.



Lavender | **OLIVIA JACKSON**

I know it was at the beginning of the school year because I didn't know you yet—I didn't know you the way I know you now. I remember spinning my dorm room keys in my fingers, walking up the stairs to see that you had left me a present. Scotch-taped to my dormitory door was a bunch of lavender, gruesomely tied together with a yellow rubber band. I bet I stopped breathing when I first saw it. I don't usually get gifts taped to my door, much less something as beautiful. I knew they must've been left there by a friend, though I secretly hoped it was from you.

I dropped my heavy backpack to the ground, then carefully, with the most delicate fingers, picked at the tape to bring the flowers into my room. My room was a mess—I was almost finished with building my dollhouse, a final project for my studio art class. I tiptoed around the popsicle-stick-and-paper-scrap-littered floor to my raised bed. Above my pillows and next to my dreamcatcher is where I would keep the flowers until the end of the year.

I know that you'd like my room. Soft greys with greens (like your eyes) and burnt oranges. My bed is raised high enough where I need to hop a little bit to reach it. You're easily the tallest (and coolest) girl I've ever met, so you'd have no problem reaching. I like to imagine that one day you'll sneak into my room, either through the window like in a cheesy '80s movie, or we'd rush up the stairs right past the dorm staff in a way they wouldn't notice. We'd lie on my comforter and listen to David Bowie or Talking Heads or whatever you're into nowadays. I want to touch your hair. You just shaved it all off, so now it's just like velvet—it's soft when I brush my hand down from your crown, but rough and fun the other way. You'd eat my clementines and you'd trade me the rest of the cookies you stole from the French classroom. I don't think you've ever been in my room. Tell me about all the other flowers that you grow in your beautiful garden.

I would lay in my big grey bed and snuggle into my many pillows. I looked up at the beautiful gift you gave me... One of the biggest lavender buds was missing! Damn, it must've been knocked off the stem while I was making my bed this morning. I find it on the floor, then quietly tear apart my room for tape. I've

spent hundreds of dollars on art supplies, you'd think that I had some sort of tape around here somewhere.

The tape makes the lavender ugly and pathetic. I feel so horrible that I tell you tonight in the rec room. I am very apologetic, but your braces-clad mouth laughs and says everything is fine! You grew the lavender in your garden. I am still embarrassed.

You confess your crush to me a month later. Things are different between us. We decide that we're better off as friends (who are secretly in love). We give each other small, sweet gifts throughout the year—a jar of honey, a beaded glass necklace, a smooth, smooth worry stone found in the pond near campus. The lavender is still my favorite, though.

The lavender hangs above my head while I sleep, gracing me with vivid dreams of you in your garden of beautiful blooms. The soft scent relieves me of the stresses throughout the year, worrying about things that shouldn't be worried about, like student council and last-minute Mr. Clark papers. Lavender smells like you now. The thought of you calms me to the life source.

I wish I would've stayed in touch with you through the summer. The lavender bunch is at my parent's house now, in a box of treasures I've yet to unpack from last year. I hope you're doing well as a "Returning Senior," as we like to call them. You better be giving the juniors hell. You probably have new friends and a different color in your hair. I think you would look nice with yellow, like a Roy Lichtenstein painting. We'll meet up again sometime, and this time I'll bring you a sunflower with a big yellow bow. I know you'd still keep it forever.

TANYA RYAPPY

Autumn Reflection





The Man I am | **CALEB CONKLIN**

I am Caleb. I am defined by the man I have fought so hard to become.

I have fought against that dark day that tries to pull me back down, even despite the prayers and bottles I've poured out to try and fight back the suppressing demon inside. He scratches and pulls me back into the comforting darkness where he can remind me of all the eyes that judge and spit at my very being.

But I haven't given up.

I have won every battle so far and I can, and will, continue to fight until the day I die because the darkness is no place for anyone, and I much rather enjoy the light with my friends and my achievements.

My Grandmother has been a guiding light in my times. She has taught me so much, but most importantly she has taught me loss. I have learned how to mourn and cry. I have learned the feeling of dismay at the thought of never seeing someone again. I have learned to move on and cherish that person even when I can't see them for a long time. I have learned.

The camp where I go to pray will exist forever in my heart. I stumbled upon it by accident, and it's the best thing that's ever happened. The friends I have made. The choices that have brought me back when I strayed further, and further from my path. The memories that I keep building year after year bring me joy whenever I think back on them. That camp is where I was taught how to be the best me, and from here on out, it will be where I teach others how to be the best they can be.



DESIRAE RHODES

Perfect Bloom

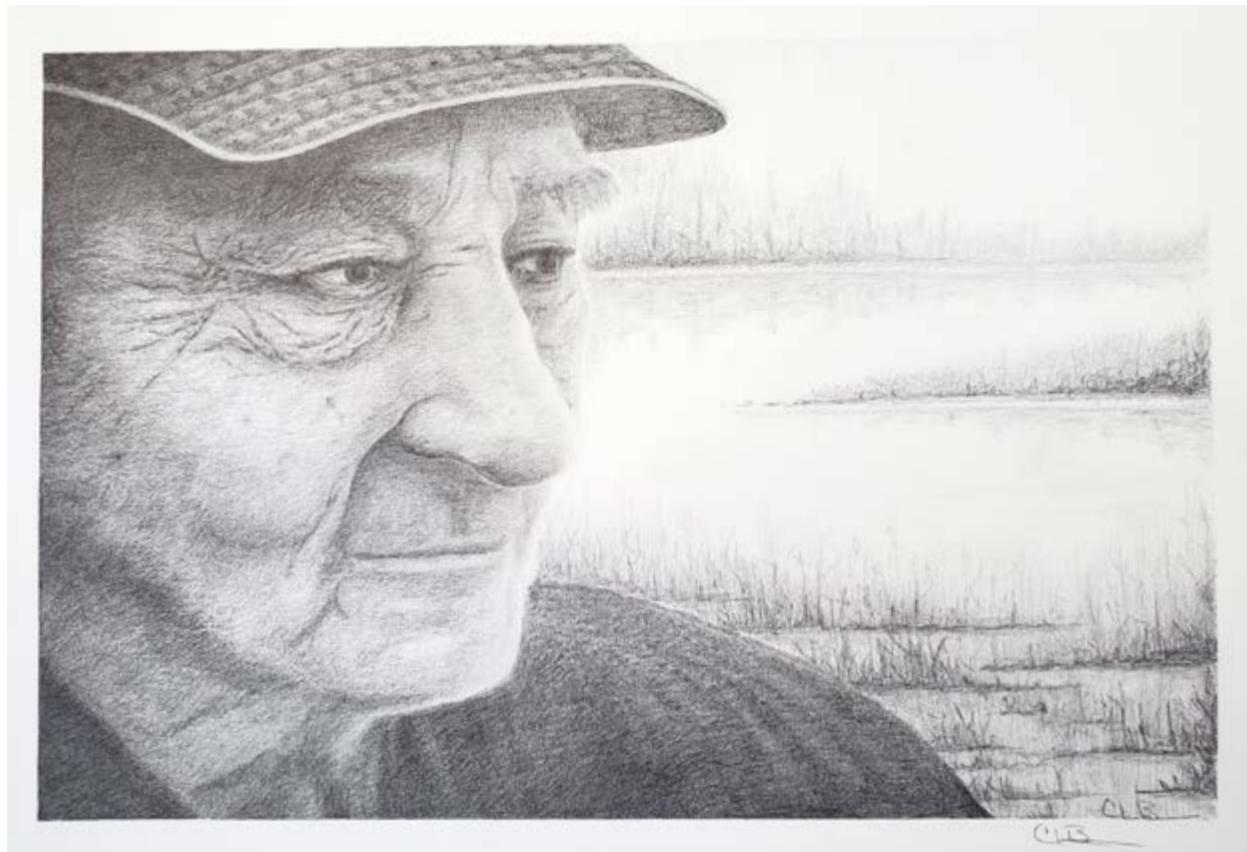




VIOLET BURR

The Mother of All Collection 2





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